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The Failed Quest in Contemporary World Literature

by

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## **Declaration**

This thesis is submitted to the University of Warwick in support of my application for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy. It has been composed by myself and has not been submitted in any previous form for any degree.

## Abstract

The last two decades have witnessed a series of spectacular failures which have had severe and widespread global consequences, from the global financial and banking crisis, to the rising threat of climate change, to increasing global wealth inequality. Within academic scholarship, however, failure has often been conceptualised on the level of the individual. This has resulted in a narrow focus on the failed individual and how the individual copes and negotiates with failure, while overlooking its broader causes. In order to address this issue, my thesis approaches failure as a method of characterising global and localised systems and institutions. I identify a sense of global failure which I define as comprising global inequality, economic crisis, and ecological disaster, which informs and is informed by failures specific to localised contexts. I shall define the localised failures in relation to the four novels that constitute my corpus: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*, Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*, Julia Kristeva's *Possessions*, and Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*. I have selected the quest narrative as an ideal vehicle through which to examine failure, due to its particular association with success and its long tradition of adaptability to changing concerns. Being an extremely goal-oriented genre, quest narratives often depict an individual hero, his journey, and the ultimate achievement of his goal. Therefore, by shifting focus away from the individual and his success, this thesis ultimately explores how the contemporary failed quest can function as critiques of the socio-political conditions that rendered failure inevitable.

## References

All referencing will be done in the MLA Style.



## Introduction

The last two decades have borne witness to and been affected by a series of remarkable failures with severe and widespread global consequences. From the collapse of Lehman Brothers in 2008 heralding a global financial and banking crisis that national economies are still struggling with today, to the unprecedented loss of confidence in politicians and public institutions in general. Industry giants continue to put profits before social and environmental responsibility, and a pervasive failure to adequately address the issue of global climate change has been dramatically represented by environmental disasters like Hurricane Katrina in the United States and Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, an increase in droughts, and the accelerating rise of sea levels. The intense and ongoing concentration of wealth in the hands of a small group of individuals and the failure of governments to satisfy the legitimate aspirations and expectations of their citizens, have respectively led to mass protests and uprisings such as the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 and a wave of revolutions across North Africa and the Middle East between 2010 and 2012. Such failures have been a leading contributor to the loss of faith in governments and institutions, resulting in one of its most visceral consequences with the most significant rise of the far-right in Europe and America since the Second World War. 2016 saw both the United Kingdom vote to leave the European Union as well as the election of Donald Trump in the United States, and a series of gains by far-right parties throughout Europe, including Italy, Hungary, France, Germany, and Sweden in the following years.

Despite the wide-ranging nature of these failures, failure itself is still often conceptualised on the level of the individual. Yet, I argue that the recent developments outlined above necessitate the rethinking of failure, shifting focus from the failed individual and how the individual negotiates with failure to a broader critique of globalised and localised systems and institutions. To do so, I am aware, runs the risk of rendering an already vague concept, that of failure, even more so by subsuming a wide range of socio-political events under one universalising descriptor. For this reason, I approach failure as a collision between globalised ideas of failure and localised ones, in which both inform and are informed by the other. I identify a sense of global failure

which I argue consists of three interconnecting failures – global inequality, economic crisis, and ecological disaster – before approaching failure within a localised and specific context in the four novels that form my corpus: Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road*, Michael Ondaatje’s *Anil’s Ghost*, Julia Kristeva’s *Possessions*, and Basma Abdel Aziz’s *The Queue*. I have selected the quest narrative as a particularly useful vehicle through which to examine failure, primarily due to it being a genre largely concerned with success. Extremely goal-oriented, it focuses on an individual hero’s journey and on the trials and tribulations that he encounters in pursuit of that goal. Yet a focus on failed quests rather than the successful ones can help to shift focus away from the individual as a failure to an examination of the individual’s surrounding context. I therefore read these quests as socio-political critiques of the causes of the protagonist’s failure, thereby shifting blame from the individual to the conditions that rendered success impossible.

In the first chapter, I outline the theoretical framework and methodology that informs this thesis. I will first focus on previous scholarship on failure, identifying three main strains of failure criticism which I term personal failure, temporary failure, and alternative failure. These approaches, I will argue, contextualise failure specifically as it concerns the individual and how the individual negotiates their role as a failure. In contrast, I will outline how I approach failure as a socio-political critique of contemporary world-systems and institutions. Here I identify a global sense of failure predominately consisting of global inequality, economic crisis, and ecological disaster that informs and is informed by the localised failures that I explore in the later chapters specific to their own socio-political contexts. In the next section of this chapter, I discuss why the quest narrative provides an ideal vehicle through which to represent failure due to its concern with success and its inherent flexibility, allowing it to be adapted to suit a variety of contexts. I give an overview of the significant developments of the quest narrative for this thesis’ formation of the failed quest, outlining how the epic tradition and medieval literature established the foundations of the genre as fluid and flexible to the storyteller’s needs. I then proceed to the twentieth century and discuss how Anglo-American, modernist authors used the quest to develop an aesthetics of failure, while at the same time archetypal scholarship formalised the genre with the hero’s journey. Through this overview, I emphasise how the longevity of the quest narrative is highly

predicated on the ease at which it can be adapted to represent and respond to the author's current concerns. Using the theoretic framework I outline in the sections on failure and quest, I develop a methodology that identifies five main aspects of the contemporary failed quest: the quester, their motivation to quest, their encounters with other characters during the journey, the questing landscape as a space of failure, and finally, the failure itself and its implications. This methodology will then be applied to each of the novels I discuss in subsequent chapters.

In the second chapter, I analyse Cormac McCarthy's novel *The Road*, published in 2006 and set in a post-apocalyptic America following an unidentified cataclysm. The text follows an unnamed man and boy as they travel through the devastated American landscape, going south towards the coast in search of a place to call home where they will be safe and warm, a quest which ultimately fails. In this chapter, I contextualise the novel as an American post-apocalyptic novel primarily concerned with the notion of American Exceptionalism. My first focus is the man's role as the primary quester in the novel through which I characterise him in terms of his love for his son. His son's survival, I discuss, is the man's only reason for continuing on his journey, which he views as the only source of meaning in his now meaningless existence. Through the novel's repeated motif of 'carrying the fire', I will analyse the man's motivation to quest by exploring how both he and his son use this symbol to keep going despite the unrelenting temptation to give up. I will then focus on the two kinds of encounters with other people the novel features, specifically the other people they meet on the road, the gangs of cannibals they live in fear of, and the man's long dead wife whom he frequently dreams about. During these encounters, I argue, the protagonists are challenged on their perception of not only their quest but also their own sense of morality. I also pay special attention to the space of failure McCarthy depicts, examining how the novel features a post-apocalyptic world fundamentally informed by contemporary American anxieties, whether they be environmental, economic, or ideological. The last section will focus on the failure of the quest and the implications it has for the novel's vision of the future of humanity. This chapter will ultimately discuss whether the novel follows the tradition of presenting a warning for the future common to post-apocalyptic literature or whether it is solely intended as a critique reflecting current

American concerns. My reading of the novel leans towards the latter, ultimately concluding that McCarthy presents the world as doomed to failure with the only place of refuge in the loving relationship between the father and son.

In the third chapter, I examine Michael Ondaatje's 2000 novel *Anil's Ghost* which, set in Sri Lanka in the midst of its civil war, depicts the return of forensic scientist Anil Tissera and her return to her native country with the purpose of investigating human rights abuses. Her quest for truth and justice ultimately fails as she is unceremoniously forced to leave the country. I begin by contextualising the novel as a forensic detective quest, one which is particularly concerned with the use of the scientific method in human rights investigations. I will subsequently look at how Anil functions as the text's quester primarily characterised by a sense of distance, isolated by both her career as a forensic scientist as well as her long absence from Sri Lanka. Due to this distance, I argue, Anil assumes that by maintaining a rational and scientific approach to her quest she can locate objective and unbiased truth, a notion that Ondaatje challenges and ultimately rejects. I will look at her encounters with Sri Lankan characters who, having been embroiled in the long and brutal conflict, are now traumatised and guilt-ridden, challenging Anil's oversimplified perception of guilt and innocence. Through the characters' repeated debates on the nature and implications of truth, I subsequently discuss, Ondaatje critiques the exoticized representations of Sri Lanka that proliferate in Western media. The last section will focus on the failure of the quest and Anil's departure from the island not as a triumphant Westernised hero but as a Sri Lankan who has relearned her native country. As this chapter will ultimately argue, Ondaatje utilises the failed quest to critique of the failure of discourses on human rights and their universalising notions of truth and justice, and advocate for the importance of human connection in overcoming trauma.

The quest narrative is undoubtedly a male-dominated genre, generally depicting the exploits of male heroes and their adventures. Kristeva's *Possessions*, published in French in 1996 and translated into English in 1998, presents the opportunity to discuss an exception to the rule with a female quester. It centres around Stephanie Delacour as she travels to the fictional city of Santa Varvara and attempts to find and reveal the truth about her friend Gloria's murder. I will begin the chapter by exploring how the novel

not only depicts a female-centred quest by a female author but also prioritises and problematises the act of depicting a female narrative. I then focus on Stephanie's role as the novel's quester, arguing she assumes an emotional approach in her investigation of her friend's murder, prioritising the act of listening over speaking. The subsequent section focuses on Stephanie's motivation to undertake the quest, which I characterise as her emotional identification with Gloria due to their similarities and her desire to relate a narrative of her life that can adequately represent the two women. I then look at the encounters Stephanie has in Santa Varvara, identifying the novel's use of the act of speaking – or remaining silent – as the primary method through which to represent the characters' relationships with each other. I next focus on the space of failure Kristeva uses in her novel, defining the fictional Santa Varvara as a city which engenders hatred towards foreign women, particularly those with successful careers and visibly chaotic lives. The last section focuses on Stephanie's failure to reveal the perpetrator of the final crime, the decapitation, and how that failure not only allows the murderer to escape justice but also leaves Gloria's narrative incomplete. This chapter's core intent lies in the exploration of how the failed quest can represent the problematics inherent in narrating female experience.

In the last chapter, I discuss Basma Abdel Aziz's debut novel *The Queue*, originally published in Arabic in 2013 and translated into English in 2016. Set in the aftermath of the 2010-2012 revolution, the novel depicts a dystopian vision of Egypt in which citizens must queue in front of a massive gate for permission to access basic necessities. The narrative follows Yehya Gad el-Rab Saeed who, having been hit by a stray bullet during the revolution, must attain a permit from the gate for his surgeon Tarek Fahmy to remove the bullet. The gate, however, never opens and Yehya has still not undergone the surgery by the end of the novel. I will begin the chapter by contextualising the novel as an Egyptian, post-revolutionary dystopic novel. I will then focus on how Yehya is defined by standing and waiting in false hope for a solution to his problem, representing a less active variety of the questing protagonist. The next section will analyse his motivation to quest, focusing on the relation between survival and resistance that Abdel Aziz presents, emphasising how the bullet functions as a call to action for Yehya, and by extension Tarek. In analysing the encounters of the quest, I

focus on how the text depicts a variety of characters of different classes, ages, and genders, who are all united by the fact that they all must wait in the queue. Next, I define the space of failure that represents the questing landscape as defined by a fear of erasure and the overwhelming presence of the gate, arguing that its psychical and psychological presence creates a sense of inescapability and futility. In the last section, I focus on Yehya's failure to undergo the surgery and remove the bullet that is causing his physical deterioration and eventually his death. Although Yehya's quest is a failure, I argue, it is this very failure that inspires Tarek to overcome his passivity, making the decision to take a stand and alter the official record. In doing so, as this chapter ultimately argues, Abdel Aziz posits that failure can engender feelings of hopelessness and fear yet, at the same time, it can also inspire resistance.

Although the focus of this thesis is failure, it does not advocate for nihilism, apathy, or inaction, nor do any of the texts I examine. Instead, such examinations can present an opportunity to go beyond totalising notions of success and failure. This, I argue, is not accomplished through celebrating, downplaying, or dismissing failure and its potential to have devastating consequences. Rather, the bleakness of the spaces of failure these novels depict and the individual's failure to successfully surpass them throw into sharper focus the moments of love, human connection, empathy, and resistance; and ultimately emphasises the value of these moments beyond the binaries of success and failure.

# 1. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

This chapter consists of three sections: the first will present an overview of previous criticism of failure and define failure as it is discussed in this thesis, the second will focus on the development of the quest narrative in literature and scholarship, and the third will lay out the methodology that will be applied to the four texts under discussion. In its overview of the critical work on failure, I identify three main strands of failure criticism which I term personal failure, temporary failure, and alternative failure, before defining the concept of failure discussed in this thesis as characterising a socio-political critique of current world-systems and institutions. This global sense of failure, I argue, encapsulates global inequality, economic crisis, and ecological disaster, and informs and is informed by the more localised failures that I explore in the later chapters relative to their specific contexts. The next section will identify four major points in the development of the quest narrative essential to this thesis' understanding of the failed quest. The establishment of the heroic quest in the ancient epic tradition and the reinforcement of the quest as a genre with the motif of the Holy Grail in medieval literature, I argue, presented a foundation for the quest genre which was fluid and adaptable to the storyteller or poet's needs. The use of the quest to develop an aesthetics of failure in Anglo-American twentieth century literature as a response to a perceived lack of meaning and spirituality in modern life saw an engagement with failure aesthetics beyond merely depicting failed quests. Running parallel to this development, the formalisation of the quest in scholarship with the archetypal hero's journey portrayed the quest as an internal and universal journey which all individuals must go through to locate the divine within themselves and the rest of humanity. These sections on failure and quest will function as the theoretical framework of this thesis which I will use to develop a methodology that identifies five aspects of the failed quest to be explored in each of the novels in their respective chapters.

## 1.1 Failure

In *The Sense of an Ending*, Frank Kermode notes the tendency attached 'to the exercise of thinking about the future that one should assume one's own time to stand in

an extraordinary relation to it' (94). 'We think of our own crisis', he argues, 'as pre-eminent, more worrying, more interesting than other crises', citing the ubiquity of talking 'about our historical situation as uniquely terrible and in a way privileged, a cardinal point in time.' (95). Kermode proceeds to question whether this can really be the case, doubting whether 'our crisis, our relation to the future and past, is one of the important differences between us and our predecessors' when '[m]any of them felt as we do', claiming that '[i]f the evidence looks good to us, so it did to them' (95). He thus concludes that conceiving of existence as being in crisis 'is inescapably a central element in our endeavours towards making sense of our world', it 'is a way of thinking about one's moment, and not inherent in the moment itself' (95, 101). While crisis and failure are not interchangeable, they do share a significant similarity in how they can be used as an all-encompassing and unspecific way of characterising 'one's own time' as 'uniquely terrible' in comparison to past eras.<sup>1</sup> As such, I seek to address this tendency by emphasising two particular concerns of this section. My approach, firstly, regards failure as a perceived attribute rather than a statement of fact, and secondly, does not comprehend failure as a totalising characteristic of our current time but rather as a socio-political critique that must both inform and be informed by specific, localised contexts. As a concept, failure is as nebulous and unquantifiable as its binary opposite, success. It is impossible to accurately measure failure, yet it can be wielded as a personal judgement upon oneself or others, used to refer to a range of mistakes from minor errors to major calamities, or broadened out to characterise a variety of systems, social, political, ecological, and economic. Such characterising of failure as a perception or judgement, as Arjun Appadurai argues, raises questions not only as to 'how the judgment is made, who is authorized to make it, [and] who is forced to accept the judgment' but also about the nature of 'the relationship ... between the imperfections of human life and the decision to declare some of them as constituting failures'

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<sup>1</sup> On crisis see also Meiner and Veel, *The Cultural Life of Catastrophes and Crises* (2012). While this thesis engages with notions of 'crisis', most notably in its reference to Kermode here and in its discussion of the global financial crisis below, it does not assume crisis to be interchangeable with failure. This is firstly due to failure carrying with it the implication of a lack of success, of something sought or expected but not achieved. Secondly, as will be seen below, failure passes judgement on the individual in a way that crisis does not – while a person who has failed can be referred to as a failure, a person in crisis is not commonly referred to as a crisis.



(“Introduction” xxi). In order to broach these questions, this section will give an overview of previous scholarship on failure, identifying three main strands of criticism. The first type is the personal or individual failure which is perceived as caused by a moral deficiency or lack of determination. The second is the recontextualising of failure as temporary, a stepping stone or setback to be overcome on the way to success, generally in the vein of it being a vehicle for teaching and improvement. And the third as the reframing of failure as resistance to or subversion of normativity generating alternative and innovative revelations. As I will outline in this section, such scholarship is sympathetic to the individual, not apportioning blame or judgement for failure but rather attempting to rehabilitate it or remove its stigma. This approach, however, remains primarily concerned with failure on an individual level, namely how the individual is deemed to be a failure and how they cope or negotiate with this identity. Its narrow focus therefore overlooks how failure can function as a way of characterising and critiquing world-systems and institutions, that is, the causes of failure rather than its consequences.

One of the most devastating aspects of failure is how it can be used to connote not only an individual’s mistakes or shortcomings but also a judgement upon or expression of their identity.<sup>2</sup> In *Born Losers: A History of Failure in America*, Scott A. Sandage seeks to account for a pervasive sense of failure in America by tracing its shifting focus from failing in the eyes of God to connoting entrepreneurial failure. He locates the use of the term failure as a way to denominate, dismiss, or pass judgement on a person to nineteenth-century America, a by-product of its emerging and increasingly expanding capitalist economy. Before then, Sandage argues, ‘falling in business was not as calamitous as falling from grace’ (10). ‘In early America, fear of failure loomed largest on Sunday’, he elaborates, ‘Monday morning dawned about the year 1800. By then, “failure” meant an entrepreneurial fall from grace – “a breaking in business” ... Failure was an accident, not an identity, in lexicons and common usage’ (11). Early Americans, in Sandage’s view, “made” failures, but it took a while before failures – made or unmade men’ (11). He notes the implications of this recontextualization, that

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<sup>2</sup> See also Motyl and Schober’s edited collection *The Failed Individual* (2017) for a variety of perspectives on the nature of individual failure.

calling ‘a man “a complete failure” tallied both the economies of capitalism and the economies of selfhood; that is, the eternal and internal transactions that reckon how we see ourselves and how others see us’, thereby marking failure as ‘the most damning incarnation between achievement and personal identity’ (12, 5). Business thus emerges ‘as the dominant model for our inner and outer lives’, creating ‘an ideology of achieved identity; obligatory striving is its method, and failure and success are its outcomes’ (265). Sandage draws on Max Weber’s examination of the conditions that made the capitalist economy possible in his seminal 1905 text *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, particularly on his assertion that within American culture the motivation behind success is predicated on it being one’s sacred duty. ‘The earning of money within the modern economic order is, so long as it is done legally, the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling’, he writes (19). For Weber this idea ‘is what is most characteristic of the social ethic of capitalist culture, and is in a sense the fundamental basis of it’ (19). The capitalist system into which the individual is born, presents itself as unalterable and unavoidable, forcing participation in its system and relationships, and through that conformity to its rules. Both the ‘manufacturer who in the long run acts counter’ to these rules and ‘the worker who cannot or will not adapt himself’ will ‘be eliminated from the economic scene’, ‘thrown into the streets without a job’ (19-20). Those who fail to comply with these norms inevitably become failures themselves, a failure defined by the very system in which they are forced to participate.

Sandage’s historical account, while a landmark text in failure criticism, maintains a limited focus on economic failure as it relates to the individual. This is noted by Gavin Jones in his text *Failure and the American Writer: A Social History*, stating that failure as defined by historians ‘has often seemed economic at base: the inevitable result of modern pressures to define success as a market value’, as well as the appropriation of ‘failure as a kind of social identity defined by anxiety in the face of economic uncertainty’ (13). Instead failure, Jones argues, ‘has always been part of a much bigger religious and geopolitical self-consciousness in the United States’ (13). Citing the ‘threat of social failure, and the seemingly millennial consequences of that failure’ as ‘prime generators of the nation’s political rhetoric of exceptional cause’, he explores how failure becomes more pervasive within nineteenth-century American

literature, creating an ‘aesthetic practice and literary identity’ (12-13).<sup>3</sup> It develops failure into ‘a much bigger and more complex idea: a process of thinking, knowing, feeling, and being’ that ‘becomes essential to an understanding of what makes us human – both within and beyond the pressures of social context’ (13). ‘If failure has a consistent identity worked out across the course of nineteenth-century American literature’, he concludes, ‘then it can be found in this relationship between a broad contemplation of the nature of human crisis and imperfection, and the specific social failures ... that seem peculiarly attached to the shaky situation of the writer in modernity’ (156-7). Although Jones makes reference to failure as defining ‘broader social conventions and institutions’, he argues that these writers were more concerned with delving into the personal aspects of failure, those ‘more self-generated than imposed’ (157). ‘Even the more liberating efforts to unhook failure from blame, or to engage it as a social critique, are especially muted and faltering in kind’, he writes, they are unable ‘to represent a self that is not as damaged and damaging as the social codes that surround it’ (157). This form of failure is sympathetic to the individual and his perception as a failure. It does not blame the individual by apportioning to them the critique of moral or personal flaw as reason for failure, rather critiquing the notion of ‘complete failure’ as an identity. The critique is, however, focused on consequences rather than systemic causes by maintaining the emphasis on the failed individual.

The second form this section focuses on is failure as temporary, a setback that challenges one’s resilience in the face of adversity and can be overcome with determination and the right attitude.<sup>4</sup> ‘Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better’: This short line taken from Samuel Beckett’s 1983 novella *Worstward Ho* has experienced a surge of popularity in the last few years as an inspirational mantra for entrepreneurs, athletes, and motivators (1). By placing the emphasis on the ‘failing again’ and ‘failing better’, this line can be co-opted as a short, pithy invocation in the

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<sup>3</sup> See also Martha Banta’s *Failure and Success in America: A Literary Debate* (2015) and Denis Donoghue’s ‘The American Style of Failure’ (1974).

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Ehrenreich argues that maintaining a positive attitude in the face of adversity contributes to the ‘mass delusion of positive thinking’, creating ‘a harsh insistence on personal responsibility: if your business fails or your job is eliminated, it must be because you didn’t try hard enough, didn’t believe firmly enough in the inevitability of your success’ (8-9). See also Sarah Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* (2010) and Lauren Berlant’s *Cruel Optimism* (2011).

vein of ‘if at first you don’t succeed, try try again’. It has, for example, been cited by Richard Branson who clarifies that the quote comes, ‘from the playwright, Samuel Beckett, but it could just as easily come from the mouth of yours truly’ (qtd. in O’Connell). As Mark O’Connell writes in *Slate*, ‘The entrepreneurial class has adopted the phrase with particular enthusiasm, as a battle cry for a startup culture in which failure has come to be fetishized, even valorized’, rebranding failure as ‘an essential stage in the individual’s progress toward lucrative self-fulfillment’ (“The Stunning Success”). Novelist Ned Beauman describes how the quotation has also entered the sphere of self-help books, stating that ““Fail better” is now experimental literature’s equivalent of that famous Che Guevara photo, flayed completely of meaning and turned into a successful brand with no particular owner’ (“Fail Worse”). This invocation to try and try again, to carrying on after failure, wiser and more determined, is predicated on the notion that one must always bounce back, must always be resilient in the face of failure. David Chandler and Julian Reed stress resilience as a key component of what they term the ‘neoliberal subject’.<sup>5</sup> In an eponymous text, they explore how, despite ‘its claims to make humans more adept and capable in their dealing with the world, the promotion of resilience requires and calls forth a much degraded subject, one defined by much diminished capabilities for autonomy and agency’ (1). Through the ‘process of constructing resilient subjects’, the individual is divested ‘of any belief in the possibility of determining their own conditions for development and security, and [accepts] instead the necessity of adaptation to the “realities” of an endemic condition of global insecurity and to the practice of ‘sustainable development’ instead’ (1-2). While Chandler and Reed focus on how resilience degrades the individual’s capacity for autonomy, in *Resilience and Melancholy* Robin James explores how it valorises the act of rallying and emerging stronger after failure. She cites resilience discourse as ‘neoliberalism’s upgrade on modernist notions of coherence and deconstruction – the underlying value or ideal that determines how we organise artworks, political and social institutions, the economy, concepts of selfhood, and so on’ (4). It is, in her view, ‘the hegemonic or

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<sup>5</sup> Chandler also engages with resilience in previous publications, notably *Resilience: The Governance of Complexity* (2014) and ‘Beyond neoliberalism: Resilience, the new art of governing complexity’ (2014), yet *The Neoliberal Subject* is the most concerned with resilience on an individual level.

“common sense” ideology that everything is to be measured, not by its overall systematicity (coherence) or by its critical, revolutionary potential (deconstruction), but by its *health*’ (4 emphasis in original). ‘This “health”’, she argues, ‘is maintained by bouncing back from injury and crisis in a way that capitalizes on deficits so that you end up ahead of where you initially started’ (4). Furthermore, ‘[i]f resilience is the new means of production, this means that crisis and trauma are actually necessary, desirable phenomena – you can’t bounce back without first falling’ (4). Thus, in this second form, failure connotes a different identity to the personal failure I outline above. It no longer passes such harsh judgement on the individual’s identity but instead celebrates their attempts at success. Their failure is a setback yes, but it also presents the opportunity to try again, to fail again, and to learn from one’s previous mistakes, to fail better.

John A. Ochoa employs this definition in *The Uses of Failure in Mexican Literature and Identity*, viewing failure ‘as a useful tool ... an unusual means towards self-knowledge’ (6). Ochoa focuses on a range of nineteenth- and twentieth-century Mexican authors that depict ‘the precise moment of failure, and not necessarily its long aftermath or its reconstruction in hindsight’ seeking to avoid the ‘post-traumatic testimony seeking to disinter the past in order to explain the ruination of the present’ (5-6). Rather he presents texts that, ‘because of their proximity to the moment of collapse as well as the textual failures within them, display a heightened moment of knowledge, a flash of insight’ (7). He notes the inherent usefulness of failure in their ability to present ‘opportunity of laying bare the seams, the unseen continuities of form and of history. The collapse of an idea, a system, or even a simple plan often forces a mode of self-examination and of explanation’ and ‘can often lead to renovation and on occasion even novelty’, thereby becoming ‘a transitional, possibly destructive, moment that precipitates new knowledge’ (5). Ostensibly, this kind of failure claims to remove the stigma assigned to Sandage’s conception of the ‘complete failure’. It perceives failure as inevitable, something every individual experiences in their lives and that should not be dwelt on but learned from in order to guarantee success in the future. Failure thereby becomes merely part of the process, and so long as one is determined and resilient enough it only ever remains temporary. Yet temporary failure still maintains the blame

on the individual, urging them to keep striving for success so that failure is still maintained as a moral judgement or an indicator of a lack of character or determination.

The third form of failure is failure presented as an alternative to or subversion of social norms. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith (Jack) Halberstam posits a view of failure functions to create ‘alternative ways of knowing and being that are not unduly optimistic, but nor are they mired in nihilistic critical dead ends’ (24). ‘[I]n a heteronormative, capitalist society’, success ‘equates too easily to specific forms of reproductive maturity combined with wealth accumulation’ (2). Standing ‘in contrast to the grim scenarios of success that depend upon “trying and trying again.”’, ‘failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world’ (2-3). It ‘allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods’ (3). Failure becomes ‘a way of refusing to acquiesce to dominant logics of power and discipline and as a form of critique’ (88). ‘As a practice, Halberstam elaborates, ‘failure recognizes that alternatives are embedded already in the dominant and that power is never total or consistent; indeed failure can exploit the unpredictability of ideology and its indeterminate qualities’ (88). Drawing on Halberstam, Johannes Fehrle argues that if ‘failure is either an inevitable outcome or at least a looming threat that never goes away, then choosing to fail may ... be the most subversive and strategic option’ (114-115). Thus ‘rather than being imposed as a value judgement from the outside’, failure ‘can also be brought about by choice as an option to gain agency in a system inclined to “make failures” even out of those women who meet its demands’ (100). Failure, in Fehrle’s view has a ‘disruptive and empowering potential ... the chance to retain agency that can underlie the decision to fail before the system fails you’ (115). In this form, failure is celebrated as an opportunity to explore alternative ways of being, it becomes a method of empowerment, and even something to strive for.

This form of failure as applied to artistic endeavour is the underlying principle of Lisa Le Feuvre’s edited collection *Failure: Documents of Contemporary Art*. She explores how artists utilise failure in order to ‘take us beyond assumptions and what we

think we know ... using both dissatisfaction and error as means to rethink how we understand our place in the world' (12). 'To strive to fail', she argues, 'is to go against the socially normalized drive towards every increasing success' (12). By releasing failure from its attached stigma and declaring success overrated, 'the embrace of failure can become an act of bravery, of daring to go beyond normal practices and enter a realm of not knowing' (13). This creates, in Le Feuvre's view, an 'uncertain and beguiling space, between the two subjective poles of success and failure, where paradox rules, where transgressive activities can refuse dogma and surety', and most importantly, where 'failure can be celebrated' (19). While such a reframing of failure can undoubtedly disrupt the dominant narrative of success in a way that dismisses defeatism and nihilism in favour of empowerment and creativity, it also raises the question of whether this still constitutes failure. Regarding it as alternative or subversive, particularly by championing the act of striving to fail, carries the implication that failure is desirable. The invocation to strive to fail, furthermore, also assumes that the individual has the room to fail, that failure is an option that can be taken or not, and that to do so would not have dire consequences. Thus, I argue that this kind of subversive failure emerges as disingenuous, with a tendency to ignore the reality of failure, the devastation that can befall the individual.

In my discussion of the previous scholarship on failure I have identified three strains of individual failure: personal, temporary, and alternative. These examinations have sought to rehabilitate or remove the stigma of failure, focusing on how the individual is thought of as a failure, moves on from failure, or is empowered by failure. I argue, however, that this overlooks the potential for failure to function as a critique of the conditions that rendered the individual's success impossible and failure highly likely if not inevitable. In order to address this, I again draw on Appadurai, who notes that what is understood to constitute failure varies both spatially and temporally in that '[h]istorical understandings of failure are prone to change' as well as in that it is always regarded 'through the prisms of language, context, and tradition', implying 'that failure is a cultural fact and that its form and extent are shaped by cultural assumptions and measurements' ('Introduction' xxi). This, he writes, is further compounded by globalisation, with the 'circulation of key terms, standards, and ideologies of failure

(failed states, failed markets, failed technologies, failed diplomacy, failed social movements)’ (“Success and Failure” 68). As globalised ideas of failure circulate, they encounter more localised and specific understandings of failure. ‘Actual discourses of failure’, he notes ‘are, in fact, complex negotiated crystallizations of global and local discourses of failure’ (“Success and Failure” 68). In this thesis, I draw on Appadurai’s notion of failure as one constituted by both the global and the local, as well as social anthropologist Henrietta Moore and her work on ‘concept-metaphors’ to define failure. Concept-metaphors, she states, are a form of ‘conceptual shorthand’, ‘dominant terms that orient us towards areas of shared exchange, which is sometimes academically based’ (73). ‘Their exact meanings’, she states, ‘can never be specified in advance – although they can be defined in practice and in context – and there is a part of them that remains outside or exceeds representation’ (73). Concept-metaphors function ‘to maintain a tension between pretentious universal claims and particular contexts and specifics’ (74).<sup>6</sup> I therefore present a definition of global failure which underlies the more specific local failures discussed in the later chapters in relation to each of the texts, thereby understanding failure not as universal or homogenous but as informed by local context. In this section, I identify three contributors to global failure: global inequality, economic crisis, and environmental disaster.

The capitalist world-system has been subject to significant changes in the last century. The latest developments in the process of globalisation during the last century have featured the breaking up of major colonial empires, the emergence of the United States as a global superpower, and the unprecedented interconnectedness of nations through trade, multinational conglomerates, banking systems, and financial markets. Yet these substantial shifts have not only failed to address the unevenness between the Global North and South, they in large part have been the cause of this failure. Immanuel Wallerstein locates the onset of capitalism as a world-system in the sixteenth century,

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<sup>6</sup> See also ‘Globalising Failures’ in which Diane Perrons and Silvia Posocco draw on Moore’s concept-metaphors to both globalisation and failure in order to examine ‘how failure could provide a resource for understanding the complexity of globalising processes and play a role in identifying alternative pathways’ (132). Defining failure as ‘the variety of circumstances in which expected outcomes do not materialise’ they ‘focus on how the immediate actors identify and/or respond to failure and how failure itself can constitute a resource or opportunity for new (though not necessarily more efficacious) strategies, models, interpretations and ways of being’ (132).



but it is not until ‘the latter half of the twentieth century’ that ‘the inner corners and more remote regions of the globe have all been effectively integrated’ (9). In Wallerstein’s view, the world is separated into the core and periphery, with the core comprising developed, industrial countries, and the periphery as the underdeveloped poorer ones. This results in the surplus being directed from the periphery to the core, as the former is exploited by the latter, allowing the core to assume the central role in the world’s economy through capitalist expansion, and thus become a major contributing factor to unequal development. Thomas Piketty’s wide-ranging and influential study of inequality *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* identified the First and Second World Wars as having ‘transformed the structure of inequality’, so that ‘in the second decade of the twenty-first century, inequalities of wealth that had supposedly disappeared are close to regaining or even surpassing their historical highs’ (597). This is in concordance with the findings of the World Wealth and Income Database (WID.world), who at the end of 2017 published a report detailing how ‘at the global level, the top 0.1% income group has captured as much of the world’s growth since 1980 as the bottom half of the adult population’ while ‘income growth has been sluggish or even nil for the population between the global bottom 50% and top 1%’ (Alvaredo et al. 286). Global inequality and uneven wealth distribution were to be exacerbated and thrown into stark relief with the most visceral economic failure of recent times, the global financial crisis of 2008 and its resultant stock market crash, numerous bank failures, and necessitated government bailouts of financial institutions in order to keep the financial world system afloat.

The financial crash and its aftermath, I argue, contributed to this sense of global failure in two fundamental ways. Firstly, the fact that international financial institutions were too powerful and essential to be prosecuted for causing the crash and its subsequent recession, leading to not only an unprecedented loss of faith in the institutions themselves but also in the governments that were unable or unwilling to hold them accountable.<sup>7</sup> Secondly, that despite the crash signalling the unsustainability of the

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<sup>7</sup> Another significant contributor to this loss of faith was the fact that very few people, particularly economists, seemed to have predicted the financial crash. See ‘The Financial Crash and the Systemic Failure of Academic Economists’, a report compiled by eight American and European economists in

dominant neoliberal ideology that defines the current economic world-system, a viable alternative failed to emerge in the aftermath. These two interrelated consequences of the economic crisis, I argue, lend credence to the claim that neoliberalism does not maintain its stronghold as the global economic system in spite of its failure, but because it is able to adapt and become more extreme in response to its own failures.

The wake of the financial crisis also saw the popularisation of the phrase ‘too big to fail’ as a descriptor for the financial institutions that had to be bailed out in order to avoid bankruptcy. Gary Stern and Ron Feldman define ‘too big to fail’ (TBTF) in their eponymous book as ‘a term describing the receipt of discretionary government support by a bank’s uninsured creditors who are not automatically entitled to government support’ (xvii). ‘Some banks fail without notice’, they state, while others ‘capture the attention of policy makers, often because of the bank’s large size and significant role in the financial system’ (xvii). Thus, the ‘failure of a large banking organization is seen as posing significant risks to other financial institutions, to the financial system as a whole, and possibly to the economic and social order’ (xvii). A bank gains the title ‘too big to fail’ when, ‘due to such fears, policymakers in many countries – developed and less developed, democratic and autocratic – respond by protecting uninsured creditors of banks from all or some of the losses they otherwise would face’ (xvii). This protection from being held accountable does not only factor into the fallout of a bankrupted bank but can also significantly contribute to its failing. Huberto M. Ennis and H. S. Malek identify the tendency of a bank ‘to become larger and riskier if its uninsured creditors believe that they will benefit from [TBTF] coverage’, i.e., that if they ‘were to get in trouble the government would, under most circumstances, intervene to prevent its failure (or limit the losses to uninsured creditors upon failure)’ (21). Furthermore, as Brandon Garrett pointed out, the aftermath of the financial crisis emphasised that such banks are not only too big to fail, they are also ‘too big to jail’ in that ‘they are considered to be so valuable to the economy that prosecutors may not hold them accountable for their crimes’ (2). To this day, no major prosecutions have been made and bankers seem to have ‘gotten away with it’, not facing consequences for crashing the global economy

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which the definitively state that the global financial crisis ‘*made clear a systemic failure of the economics profession*’ (250, emphasis in original).

and contributing to the worst recession since the Great Depression. The global financial crisis therefore exceeds its embodiment of solely economic failure but further indicates a severe failure of justice, not only exacerbating global income inequality but significantly contributing to a loss of faith in international institutions.

In the wake of the crisis many scholars, journalists, and activists heralded the end of neoliberalism and thus predicted that a new economic system would emerge and take hold. Nobel Prize winning economist Joseph Stiglitz stated in 2008 that ‘the fall of Wall Street is for market fundamentalism what the fall of the Berlin Wall was for communism – it tells the world that this sense of economic organization turns out not to be sustainable’ (“The Fall of Wall Street”). ‘We don’t yet know how grave and lasting the consequences of the present world crisis will be’, wrote Eric Hobsbawm in 2009 ‘but they certainly mark the end of the sort of free-market capitalism that captured the world and its governments in the years since Margaret Thatcher and President Reagan’ (“Socialism has failed”). Locating the original of neoliberal dominance as ‘when its opposed predecessor, generally known as Keynesian demand management, entered its own massive crisis in the inflation of the 1970s’, Colin Crouch asks ‘[i]f this crisis proved more or less terminal’, why ‘should we not now expect the end of neoliberal dominance and the emergence of something new following its crisis?’ (1) The answer again lies within the concept of ‘too big to fail’, with those ‘considered so important to the early twenty-first-century economy’ being ‘protected from the consequences of their own folly’ (1). ‘Although it was the behaviour of the banks that caused the 2008-9 crisis, they emerged from it more powerful than before’, he elaborates, ‘the forces that gain most from neoliberalism – global corporations, particularly in the financial section – maintain their importance more or less unchallenged’ (1). This is particularly egregious in Crouch’s view given that most other sectors, significantly the public sector, were not as protected from the effects of the crisis, with wide-ranging cuts to public services and resources, and thus, the ‘financial sector has demonstrated the dependence of the rest of society on its operations’ (2).

Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore note neoliberalism’s ability to exacerbate regulatory failure, stating that its imposition ‘has not established a framework for sustainable development, stable political regulation or social cohesion’ (154). ‘Rather’,

they elaborate, ‘neoliberalization projects are deeply contradictory insofar as they tend to undermine many of the economic, institutional and geographical preconditions for socioeconomic revitalization’ (154). Neoliberalism is thus incapable ‘of resolving the political-economic crisis tendencies of contemporary capitalism’, instead functioning to exacerbate ‘them by engendering various forms of market failure, state failure and government failure’ (154). ‘The failures of neoliberalism’, however, ‘have not triggered its abandonment or dissolution as a project of radical institutional transformation’, only serving to highlight its capacity to evolve and ‘reinvent itself – politically, organizationally, spatially – in close conjunction with its pervasively dysfunctional social consequences’ (154). Its ability to maintain its stronghold a decade after the financial crisis is not merely a testament to neoliberalism’s adaptability in the face of failure. It does not succeed in spite of failure but rather because of it. Neoliberalism maintained its stronghold throughout the crisis, an ability Naomi Klein discussed in *The Shock Doctrine*. She uses the term ‘disaster capitalism’ to describe the ‘fundamentalist form of capitalism’ that ‘has consistently been midwifed by the most brutal forms of coercion, inflicted on the collective body politic as well as on countless individual bodies. The history of the contemporary free market .... was written in shocks’ (19). ‘This is how the shock doctrine works: the original disaster – the coup, the terrorist attack, the market meltdown, the war, the tsunami, the hurricane – puts the entire population into a state of collective shock’ so as to facilitate the implementation of unpopular economic reform (17). ‘Neoliberal policies are everywhere beset by market failure’, writes George Monbiot, yet governments continue to use these failures ‘as both excuse and opportunity to cut taxes, privatise remaining public services, rip holes in the social safety net, deregulate corporations and re-regulate citizens’ (“Neoliberalism”). ‘The greater the failure’, he argues, ‘the more extreme the ideology becomes’ (“Neoliberalism”). Neoliberalism and failure emerge as mutually complementally facets of the current economic system.

The third aspect of this global sense of failure is that of the looming threat of ecological disaster, and particularly the failure to implement the adequate changes necessary to prevent or slow down its progress. In November 2017, an article entitled ‘World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity: A Second Notice’ was published and signed

by over 15,000 scientists from 184 countries as a call to action to legitimately address ecological concerns, writing that it will soon ‘be too late to shift course away from our failing trajectory, and time is running out’ (3).<sup>8</sup> As with the financial crisis discussed above, humanity ‘not taking the urgent steps needed to safeguard our imperiled biosphere’ is also framed as a failure, a failure ‘to adequately limit population growth, reassess the role of an economy rooted in growth, reduce greenhouse gases, incentivize renewable energy, protect habitat, restore ecosystems, curb pollution, halt defaunation, and constrain invasive alien species’ (1-2). ‘Climate science has been a success story’ Dale Jamieson notes, ‘[w]hatever its failures to adequately inform policy, the larger failure has been that we have not enacted climate policy’ (81). ‘Ultimately’, he states, ‘the failure to take action on climate change rests with our institutions of decision-making, not on our ways of knowing’ (81). Climate change presents humanity with ‘the world’s largest collective action problem’, which seems ‘effectively irreversible on timescales that are meaningful to us’ (99, 178). ‘Our failure to prevent or even to respond significantly’, he argues, ‘reflects the impoverishment of our systems of practical reason, the paralysis of our politics, and the limits of our cognitive and affective capacities’, none of which shows any likelihood of changing soon (178). Paul Harris agrees that ‘[d]ecades-long efforts by governments and the international community to cooperate in protecting the global environment have failed to bring about robust action to limit the greenhouse gas pollution causing global warming and climate change’ (1). ‘One reason for this tragedy of the atmospheric commons’, in Harris’ view, ‘is the preoccupation of governments and societies with apolitical independence and national sovereignty, the dominance of an international system premised on that sovereignty, and a failure adequately to recognise twenty-first-century realities’ (1). Thus, by ‘pursuing apparently logical economic and social development, and by acting in ways that are assumed to promote the interests of states and their citizens, humanity continues dangerously to alter the Earth’s atmospheric and climate systems’ resulting in ‘profound consequences for human well-being and, for millions of people, even survival’ (1). This inevitably calls into question who produces as well as who bears the

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<sup>8</sup> This second warning was an update on an earlier article published by the Union of Concerned Scientists (UCS), ‘World Scientists’ Warning to Humanity’ (1992).

brunt of these profound consequences. ‘The asymmetry between emissions and impacts’, P.R. Shukla states, ‘highlights the equity concerns in climate change problem since a greater burden of impacts is distributed to poorer nations by national processes, while most anthropogenic greenhouse gas emissions arise from economic activities in affluent nations’ (146). The effects of climate change thus emerge as another failure of justice, with those responsible bearing the lighter share of the consequences. In contrast, those counties most vulnerable and least responsible bear the heavier burden.

I opened this section by emphasising that failure is a perception or judgement rather than a fact or quantity that can be accurately measured. As such, I proceeded to define this thesis’ formation of failure as a concept-metaphor interconnecting global inequality, economic crisis, and the threat of ecological disaster. While each of these facets can be measured and quantified, I argue that it is in the sense of inequality and injustice, the loss of faith in institutions and government, and the fact that wealthier individuals are protected from the consequences of their own wrongdoing that global failure is located. It is, above all, in the overwhelming perception that the consequences of global failure are far from equally and evenly distributed.

## **1.2 Quest**

In formulating a definition of global failure that does not assume to be universalising or level in its repercussion, I emphasise that failure does not only function as a method of characterising a wide-ranging, global critique but also must inform and be informed by spaces of failure that are localised to specific contexts. In order to apply this approach to the four novels in this thesis, I utilise the framework of the failed quest narrative as a way to examine how the individual must interact and negotiate with the spaces they enter in an attempt to achieve their goal. The quest is a particularly useful vehicle through which to examine failure for two particular reasons. Firstly, it is a narrative largely concerned with success. As a highly goal-oriented genre, it focuses on an individual hero’s journey and the trials and tribulations encountered in pursuit of that goal. Thus, a focus on the failed quest rather than on successful ones can help to shift focus away from the idea of individual failure to an examination of the conditions that rendered success impossible, a particular concern of this thesis as I mentioned above.

Secondly, since its very inception in antiquity the quest has been used by oral storytellers, poets, novelists, and scholars as a way of representing and addressing their contemporary urgencies and priorities. A significant contributor to the longevity of the quest narrative, I argue, is its inherent flexibility and resilience, the ease at which it can be adapted to reflect the concerns of a variety of contexts. This section will therefore examine the literature and scholarship of the quest narrative. This overview does not aim to chart the development of the quest narrative from antiquity to present day in its entirety as such would be beyond the scope of this thesis.<sup>9</sup> Rather, I select key focal points that are essential in forming the methodology of the failed quest as I applied it to the contemporary novels I discuss in the later chapters. This section will begin by focusing on the epic and medieval heroes and quests that introduced the quest narrative. I will explore how epic poetry established the narrative of the epic hero and his quest by presenting the heroic code yet also questioning its nature and implications. I will then look at how the quest was reinforced in medieval literature and its creation of the Holy Grail as an influential symbol for the goal of the quest. This section will next focus on the renewed interest in myth that emerged in early and mid-twentieth century Anglo-American modernist literature and archetypal criticism, with the former showing an unprecedented engagement with failure and the latter presenting the most significant scholarship on the quest genre. With this section, I aim to emphasise two essential arguments that inform this thesis. The first is my proposal that the nature of failure in the previous iterations of the quest narrative is an essentially changing one, producing variations of the narrative such as impossible quests, quests in which the hero is not worthy of his goal, the quest as a way of presenting an aesthetics of failure, and quests in which failure is largely disregarded.<sup>10</sup> While failure has always been an aspect of the quest narrative, it has received relatively little attention. The second is the notion that the

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<sup>9</sup> See for example Christine Arkininstall's *Literature and Quest* (1993), Mary Terrall's 'Heroic Narratives of Quest and Discovery', Tim Young's 'Quests' (1998), Julia Rawa's *The Imperial Quest and Modern Memory from Conrad to Greene* (2013), Maria Garcia's *Cinematic Quests for Identity: The Hero's Encounter with the Beast* (2015), and Jeff Howards' *Quests: Design, Theory, and History in Games and Narratives* (2008) for a variety of discussions on the quest narrative's use in poetry, novels, cinema, and video games.

<sup>10</sup> Since the quest narrative is a highly male-oriented genre, in this section I predominantly refer to male protagonists and their quests and therefore use the term hero and he/him pronouns to refer to the protagonists of their quests.

foundations of the quest narrative, which I here identify as those within the epic tradition and medieval romances, were adaptable from their very inception rather than being set in stone. They presented the establishing ideas of heroes and quests while simultaneously questioning their nature and implications, a feature that significantly contributed to the longevity of the narrative as it was further built upon through the ages, ensuring its contemporary resonance with authors and readers. In this thesis I therefore regard the contemporary quests not as subversions or deconstructions of an established foundation, but rather as contemporary examples of an ever-adaptable genre.

In this section, I will first explore how the ancient epic tradition established the figure of the hero, while also bringing into question the nature and implications of heroism. I will discuss how this tradition, as seen in epics such as *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*, significantly contributed to the adaptability of the quest narrative and, by extension, its relevance and use in contemporary literature. John Bryan Hainsworth and Masaki Mori both place the figure of the hero as the central defining aspect of the epic, the former in differentiating the epic from heroic poetry and the latter in defining epic grandeur.<sup>11</sup> Within heroic poetry, a community may see reflected 'an image of itself that it likes to see', with 'a tendency to show patriotic overtones, usually tribal or national but sometimes religious or cultural' (Hainsworth 6). 'The common factor', Hainsworth writes, 'is that heroic poems celebrate, affirm, and confirm something; they do not, as the epic can and does, explore and question at the same time as they celebrate' (6). In contrast, 'primary epic poetry is heroic poetry writ large, its range extended and its insights deepened' (7). It 'puts people, and therefore feelings, hope, despair, sorrow, and triumph, into the events of the heroic lay; at its best it spreads itself over the whole mass of traditional knowledge' (7). Mori cites three thematic elements that create epic grandeur: 'the hero's attitude towards his own mortality, his communal responsibility, and the dual dimension of time and space he and the entire work must cope with' (47). In other words, the epic hero must be constantly aware of the seriousness of death, of the needs of others, and of both his larger heritage and immediate culture.

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<sup>11</sup> The definition of 'epic' is a long debated and contested issue. See, for example, C.M. Bowra's *Heroic Poetry* (1952), and Richard P. Martin's 'Epic as Genre' (2005).



This section takes as its starting point *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, the oldest copy of which is dated around 2000 BC.<sup>12</sup> The Near Eastern epic is the earliest recorded narrative, and significantly, features the heroic figure, the hero's quest, and the failure of that quest. Its hero was the historical figure of Gilgamesh, an Urukian king who ruled the Sumerian city circa 2600 BCE. Classical scholar Andrew George introduces his translation by stating that the poet's 'concern is not just Gilgamesh's glorious deeds but also the suffering and misery that beset his hero as he pursues his hopeless quest' (xxxv). He continues that as 'a poem which explores the truth of the human condition the epic bears a message for future generations, then as now. Maturity is gained as much through failure as success. Life, of necessity, is hard, but one is the wiser for it' (xxxv). Thomas Greene views Gilgamesh's grief following the death of his companion Enkidu as an indication that 'primary epic as a genre is not so much concerned with heroic achievement in itself as with the affective cost of achievement' (192).<sup>13</sup> 'The sharing of tears', he argues, 'provides a contact with a hero more intense than the wonder at his accomplishments; it levels the planes of human excellence, and invites the intimacy of a simple shared humanity' (195). Tzvi Abusch similarly states that the epic 'tells of courageous deeds ... only to highlight the pain caused by these deeds and the new problems that must be faced' (616). It presents a hero who 'struggles against the world and ... is deeply committed to his own personal absolutes', yet he is capable of 'moral growth: he learns, he changes' (616). For Abusch, this is made possible through two factors, the fact that Gilgamesh's personal growth is symbolised by 'wanderings which both reflect and elicit changes in the hero' and serve as 'the mechanism and backdrop for change', as well as the death of Enkidu which serves as 'the catalyst for change' (616). *The Epic of Gilgamesh* is thus centred around Gilgamesh's moral growth, showing his ability 'to resolve the conflict, even if this is accomplished in pain, and find a life that does not depend solely on violence, impulsiveness, and battle. Conflicts and their resolutions turn the work into an epic about growth' (616). Thorkild Jacobsen notes that 'The Gilgamesh Epic is a story about growing up' (219). 'Gilgamesh', he continues,

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<sup>12</sup> Approximate dates for the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid* are taken from *The Cambridge Companion to the Epic*.

<sup>13</sup> Greene also extends this argument to include epics by Homer, Virgil, and John Milton.

‘is fleeing death by fleeing old age, even maturity; he is reaching back to security in childhood’, with the epic’s central concern revolving around ‘facing and accepting reality’ rather than depicting heroic deeds (219). Thereby, the earliest known narrative already challenges the notion of the epic hero, confronting its protagonist with the pain of grief, the necessity of maturity, and the failure of his quest for immortality.

The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, most commonly said to be composed around 700-675 BC, present perhaps two of the most iconic examples of heroic figures in their respective protagonists, Achilles and Odysseus. Yet the Homeric hero, Michael Clarke argues, is a figure ‘fraught with half-hidden tensions’. He elaborates that the Homeric heroes ‘command wonder because of their strength, their fierceness, their superhuman force, in some cases their heightened wisdom or skill in the arts of speech’, thus in part being ‘models to be imitated by young men, especially young soldiers’ (80). That same ‘energy that underlies such excellence’, however, is also ‘liable to push the hero to dangerous extremes of anger, passion and recklessness’, thus driving him ‘to a volatile and perilous level of warlike passion’ (80-81). As Thomas van Nortwick states of Achilles, ‘[n]o figure in ancient literature embodies so purely ... the destructive aspects of the heroic code, the terrible imperatives that drive men to wall themselves off from their fellows in pursuit of glory’ (39). The *Iliad* is a meditation on ‘the paradoxical nature of heroism, its alluring absolutism, its lethal isolation’, which while emphasising ‘competition, hostility, and self-absorption’ also underpins the worth of ‘self-knowledge and the ability to love’ (39). The poems feature two contrasting notions of the heroic ideal, particularly evident when Odysseus’ wanderings see him venturing into the land of the dead where he encounters Agamemnon, Achilles, and Ajax. ‘The two heroes are contrasted’, notes R.B. Rutherford, but it is Odysseus ‘who praises the heroic ideal, whereas Achilles, disillusioned by his short life and now by death, recognises the value of life on any terms, even a life without glory’ (25). While not completely rejecting ‘the ideals of honour and heroic warfare that he valued in life’, the *Odyssey* carries forward the same ‘conflict of emotion’ Achilles carried in the *Iliad*, that ‘the hero must seek renown, and glory is of supreme importance; yet ... what price of glory, if one is rewarded only with a short life, dying alone and separated from one’s home and family?’ (25-26). In Gregory Nagy’s view, the differences between the heroes and their

quests result in complementarity. ‘The monolithic personality of Achilles’, he describes, ‘is matched against the many-sidedness of Odysseus... Whereas Achilles achieves his epic centrality as a warrior, Odysseus achieves his own kind of epic centrality in an alternative way - as a master of crafty stratagems and cunning intelligence (77-78). ‘Odysseus achieves *kleos* ‘glory’ by way of successfully achieving a *nostos* ‘song about homecoming’ while ‘Achilles has to choose between *nostos* ‘homecoming’ and the *kleos* ‘glory’ that he gets from his own epic tradition’ (78). This complementarity thereby also extends to their heroic quests, further establishing within the epic a tradition of quest narratives that was inherently adaptable.

This complementarity between the two Homeric heroic quests lays the foundation for Virgil’s Roman epic the *Aeneid*, composed around 19 BC, with its first half re-enacting the *Odyssey* and its second re-enacting the *Iliad* (Nagy 78). Yet as Moses Hadas writes, ‘Aeneas differs from Achilles and Odysseus ... mainly in that he represents a specifically Roman ideal, disciplined and institutionalized in consonance with the spirit of the Augustan age’ (408). The Greek heroes ‘are more nearly free agents and less under the constraint of manifest destiny’, whereas Aeneas, ‘because he is a disciplined instrument of destiny, acquires the aspect of a symbol, which tends to separate him from ordinary humanity’ (408). ‘Not only as the founder of these two great lines, but as the parent of the Roman people, ... Aeneas must have within him all the virtues which his descendants inherit’ (408). ‘Patriotic appreciation of national values finds frequent expression, of course, especially when those values are being challenged’, Hadas says of Greek epic, ‘[b]ut nowhere, apparently, do we find a single character raised to a superhuman stature and in effect canonized as subsuming and symbolizing the national character and aspirations’ (409). David Quint similarly describes how the *Aeneid* ‘redefines the epic hero, whose heroic virtue now consists in the sacrifice of his own independent will – a will independent from his national mission’ (83). In *The Choice of Achilles*, Susanne Wofford notes that ‘epic poems often work against their expressed moral and political values, generating a poetics of division and disruption while articulating the constraints that limit any such alternative politics or local demystifying effect’ (1). ‘These divisions’, she states, ‘are in large part what makes the epic into an institution that can express and define an entire cultural system while also

revealing its contradictions and the costs of its ethical paradigms and political solutions’ (2). These epic poems establish ideas of heroism all the while questioning its nature and implications for the heroes themselves. They present an array of heroes with conflicting emotions and opposing desires and priorities which inform the nature of their quests. In doing so, I argue, these epics present a foundation of the heroic quest which is open to interpretation and adaptation, thereby significantly contributing to the longevity of the genre.

While the earlier section focused on how the hero and heroism were simultaneously celebrated and questioned in the epic tradition, I shall now look at medieval romances which function to reinforce the quest structure yet still maintain the same flexibility as their epic predecessors. As Elspeth Kennedy notes, failure – ‘to complete a task, to keep a promise, to maintain an ideal’ – is an essential aspect of Arthurian romance but exhibits ‘a different function within the structure according to the role of the character who fails, the stage in the text at which the failure occurs, the nature of the failure, the way it is presented’, as well as ‘its relationship to the central theme and to the expectations of the mediaeval reader of romance’ (16). In this section, therefore, I will give a brief outline of the romances essential for the formation of the most significant medieval quest, that of the search for the Holy Grail, focusing on how the Grail developed from a spiritual object or relic into the one of the most significant quest motifs. This section will take as its starting point the earliest recorded Grail narrative Chrétien de Troyes’ Old-French romance *Perceval, Le Conte du Graal*. Composed between 1160-80, the romance’s introduction of the Grail occurs when it is witnessed by young Knight Perceval while dining at a wounded king’s castle.<sup>14</sup> Perceval observes a procession in which after a boy carrying a bleeding lance, a young maiden enters, carrying ‘a graal’ upon which ‘so radiant a light appeared in the hall that the candles lost their brightness like the start at the rising of the moon or sun’ (29). Chrétien describes the Grail as being ‘made of fine, pure gold, inlaid with many kinds of jewels, the richest and most precious in earth or sea: the stones in the grail surpassed all other gems, without a doubt’ (29). Perceval is curious about the Grail as he watches it pass but

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<sup>14</sup> Given the impossibility of accurately dating many medieval texts, especially the earlier texts, these dates are approximate, taken from Norris Lacy’s *Arthurian Handbook* (1997).

having been previously warned against talking excessively, doesn't 'dare ask who was served from the grail' (29). He later discovers the grave consequences of his failure to ask this question after encountering a series of characters who rebuke him for his mistake. Upon leaving the castle he meets a girl who cries, 'a disaster that you failed to ask all this! You would have healed the good crippled king – he would have regained the use of his limbs and the rule of his land – and you would have profited greatly!' (32) Her subsequent warning that many ills will fall upon him and others is reiterated later with an encounter with an 'ugly damsel' who tells him the consequences of his ensuring 'that the king won't be healed and rule his land' (41). 'Ladies will lose their husbands', she warns, 'lands will be laid waste, maidens will be left in distress and orphaned, and many knights will die: all these woes will strike because of you' (41). In dismay, Perceval vows

That as long as he lived he wouldn't sleep in the same place for two nights together, nor hear word of any perilous test but he would undertake it, not hear of any knight greater than others but he would go and fight him, until he knew who was served from the grail and found the lance and learnt the truth about why it bled; he would never give up, come what may. (42)

Chrétien thus lays the foundation for one of the most enduring symbols of Arthurian literature, that of the Grail, and the quest to find it. His work was left unfinished, most likely due to his death, meaning that the first Grail quest is an incomplete one. The image of the Grail, however, was a tantalising and appealing one to subsequent writers, inspiring not only four 'Continuations' but a wealth of Arthurian literature revolving around the Grail quest.<sup>15</sup>

As pointed out by John Barry Marino, Chrétien is highly unspecific about the nature and significance of the Grail, not including concrete information about 'what the Grail is or how it got where it is', nor attributing to the Grail 'any ideology or religious associations' (15). While later appearances would make the Grail explicitly Christian, 'for Chrétien a grail, a radiant jeweled dish, at first mention not even said to be the one and only grail, and a lance which drips blood are not particularly Christian' (15). The Grail is referred to as a 'holy thing' containing a single 'host' capable of comforting and

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<sup>15</sup> On the Continuations see Lacy et al., *A Companion to Chrétien de Troyes* (2005).

sustaining the life of the king, yet these comprise the entirety of indications that these are Christian relics. Indeed, the form of a cup or chalice is most often associated with the Grail – such as that used by Christ during the Last Supper and that containing the Holy Eucharist – yet it first appears as a large serving dish. The enduring image of the sacred relic containing the blood of Christ can be traced back to Robert de Boron's cycles of romances, composed around the beginning of the thirteenth century and comprising *Joseph d'Armathie*, *Melin*, and *Perceval*.<sup>16</sup> While Chrétien depicted 'a grail', Robert recast it as the Holy Grail which was present during the Last Supper and used by Joseph of Arimathea to collect Christ's blood during the Crucifixion.<sup>17</sup> Christ charges Joseph and his descendants with guardianship of the Grail, prompting him to establish a Grail table moulded after that of the Last Supper. Robert then draws a connection to a third table, Arthur's Round Table in *Merlin*, and in *Perceval*, the titular character embarks on a successful quest for the Grail.<sup>18</sup>

The Grail retained its overtly Christian association in the Vulgate Cycle, composed around 1215-35.<sup>19</sup> The cycle contains five works: the *Estoire del saint Graal and Merlin*, largely derived and adapted into prose from Robert's *Joseph d'Armathie* and *Melin*, and the *Lancelot Proper*, *La Queste del saint Graal*, and *La Mort Artu*. They include Lancelot's failed quest for the Grail – being unworthy to receive more than a glimpse of it due to his adulterous love for Guinevere – and replace Perceval with Lancelot's son Galahad who is deemed to be pure and worthy of receiving the complete vision of the Grail. As Richard Barber points out, 'There are none of the gratuitous adventures found elsewhere in the romances', rather every scene 'is composed as a symbol, and the whole romance is infested by hermits, whose function is to explain both to the protagonist and the reader the spiritual importance of the events that unfold before them' (153). These adventures are thus 'seen as a series of tests, in which the hero will

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<sup>16</sup> However, Robert's authorship of *Perceval* is doubted by scholars, see Nigel Bryant's introduction to his translation of *Merlin and the Grail: Joseph of Arimathea, Merlin, Perceval: The Trilogy of Prose Romances Attributed to Robert de Boron* (2001) for an account of this debate.

<sup>17</sup> Chrétien's bleeding lance is also Christianised by Robert, becoming the spear that pierced Christ's side.

<sup>18</sup> This is in no way an exclusive account of the romances featuring the Grail and Grail quest within Arthurian literature. The years between the composing of Robert's romance and the Vulgate Cycle would also include *Wolfram*, *Didot-Perceval*, and *Perlesvaus* which are not elaborated on due to their being comprised of similar Grail quests to their earlier incarnations.

<sup>19</sup> Also known as the Lancelot-Grail, the Prose *Lancelot*, or the Pseudo-Map Cycle.

perform this right action', keeping in concord with 'the traditional adventures of chivalric romance' while substituting 'a moral choice for the often arbitrary key to the secular versions of such episodes' (153). Lastly, this overview will touch on Sir Thomas Malory's *Morte d'Arthur*, an abridged version and Middle English translation of the Vulgate Cycle, written around 1470. 'Rather than bringing the ultimate glory to Arthur's court', writes Marino, 'the quest for the Grail humiliates the Round Table, in its spiritual aspects, through intense moral scrutiny' (23). Malory's grail quest presents 'a spiritual ideal that at once affirms the noble worldly ideal and transcends it', upholding 'the institution and codes of knighthood on the condition that ultimately a heavenly objective remains' (23-4). For Malory, even those who lack 'the perfection of a Galahad or a Christ' can 'nonetheless strive to do good and flee evil' by embarking on the quest, therefore 'this search for a holy object has, in the English tradition, the power to ennoble those who undertake it' (Lacy 4). Shifting 'focus from the object to the conduct of its questors suggests another important fact about the quest: the process of seeking is at least as crucial as the act of finding', thus even in failure 'a measure of nobility, even tragedy, often attaches to the pursuit of those who ... nonetheless spend their lives in futile pursuit of the Grail' (Lacy 4). This change thereby represents an essential development in how failure is treated in the quest narrative.

This version is crucial since, as Marino points out, 'public conceptions of the legend begin with Malory' due to its accessible language and popularity among English readers (27). As Norris Lacy sums up, the Grail is 'a productive motif, ... scarcely conceivable apart from the quest, which motivates knights, exposes them to danger, offers opportunities for chivalric accomplishment, and distinguishes the worthy from the flawed' (4). 'The quest for the Holy Grail', he states, 'thus stands as a metaphor for all quests, for the quest that is human life, the search for accomplishment and meaning' (4). Marino agrees with this, writing that by transforming the Grail 'from an actual object to a metaphor, it can mean many things to many people', it can 'be made universal and also relative to the individual ... brought down from its sacred height and made meaningful in a secular context', becoming 'a flexible metaphor with perpetual relevance' (107-8). As with the heroes of the epic tradition, the Grail quest became an enduring motif due to its flexibility of interpretation and adaptability to the poet's needs.

Contributing to this durability was the fact that the quest was both developed and shaped in epic and medieval narratives through their respective oral traditions. As Lowell Edmunds states that while the epic stories ‘are traditional, in the sense that the internal addressee’s and the external audience’s prior knowledge of the story is assumed, ... each telling of the same story, because it has a particular motivation, has a new focus’ (32). Positing that ‘a traditional story can survive only if it can be retold, and it can be retold only if it can be applied to new circumstances’, Edmund argues that a ‘story is therefore, in retrospect, a set of variants on a fundamental pattern, while, on the occasion of any retelling, the present, individualist version is the authoritative one’ (32). Loomis similarly cites ‘the fact that [Arthurian romance] was based on the numberless short *contes* which formed the stock-in-trade of the wandering *conteurs*’ as the explanation for ‘some of the typical features of the Arthurian romance in its early stages – its episodic, loose structure, its glaring inconsistencies’ (13). Repeated retellings further reinforced the ever-changing nature of the quest, as each story teller further adapted the genre to suit their own requirements.

While epic poetry and medieval romances did establish the foundation of the quest narrative, I have argued that inherent in this foundation is space for interpretation and flexibility, a feature which was thoroughly explored in the early and mid-twentieth century in order to respond to a perceived sense of failure in modern society. In 1923, a few months after publishing *The Waste Land*, a young T.S. Eliot reviewed James Joyce’s *Ulysses* in an essay titled ‘Ulysses, Order, and Myth’, emphasising Joyce’s ‘parallel use of the Odyssey’ (177). ‘It has’, for Eliot, ‘the importance of a scientific discovery. No one else has built a novel upon such a foundation before: it has never been necessary’ (177). Thus ‘[i]n using the myth, in manipulating a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity, Mr Joyce is pursuing a method which others must pursue after him’ as ‘a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy that is contemporary history’ (177). Eliot also cites the emerging disciplines of psychology, ethnology, and the publication of James George Frazer’s widely read *The Golden Bough* as contributing ‘to make possible what was impossible even a few years ago’, the forming of the ‘mythical method ... a step towards making the modern world possible for art’ (178).



This review of Joyce's text, brief as it is, highlights the significant developments that would contribute to the modernist failed quest and the scholarship on quest: the sense that a return to myth was necessary in a way it had never been before, the emergent field of psychoanalysis, and recent contributions to mythological anthropology.

Eliot's landmark poem 'The Waste Land' epitomises the 'mythic method' its author detected in Joyce's novel in its ability to express this 'futility and anarchy'. Eliot would come to proclaim as 'nonsense' the view of 'approving critics' that said he had given voice to the 'disillusionment of a generation', stating 'I may have expressed for them their own illusion of being disillusioned, but that did not form part of my intention' ("Thoughts After Lambeth"). Yet despite his insistence that the poem 'was only the relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life' rather than 'an important bit of social criticism ... of the contemporary world', Eliot nevertheless became the touchstone for a perceived affliction of disillusionment in post-war Europe and America ("Thoughts After Lambeth"). This is identified by W.H. Auden as the 'modern problem', that is, the experience

of living in a society in which men are no longer supported by tradition without being aware of it, and in which, therefore, every individual who wishes to bring order and coherence into the stream of sensations, emotions, and ideas entering his consciousness, from without and within, is forced to do deliberately for himself what in previous ages had been done by family, custom, church, and state, namely the choice of the principles and presuppositions in terms of which he can make sense of his experience. (191-2)

Werner Hamacher would later conceptualise the disillusionment captured by Eliot and Auden's modern problem as one defined by failure. He cites failure as 'one of the most fundamental figures of modernity and especially modern literature', which, he elaborates, emerges 'from the collapse of traditional orders, from the corrosion of conventions, and from the loss of the social and aesthetic codes that were once able to secure a certain coherence and continuity for all forms of behaviour and production' (295). While this in itself is not a unique phenomenon, indeed most eras are characterised by the collapse of old norms, Hamacher differentiates his contemporary era as 'not only the result of this disintegration but also as its hero: because it recognizes

itself in the collapse of the old, modernity must make failure into its principle' (294). It follows then, that failure is 'considered a victory, and floundering is understood as a sign of historical necessity' (294). Thus modernity 'consists entirely in the project of conserving the collapse from which it emerges and which it drives ever onward' (295). The perceived sense of failure inspired in modernist literature an aesthetics of failure, and in particular, a proliferation of quest narratives within Anglo-American, modernist literature containing a multitude of allusions to epic and medieval myth; utilising the quest structure but also adapting it to respond to the sense of failure perceived in modern life.

Both the early and mid-twentieth century would bear witness to other canonical texts in addition to Joyce's and Eliot's use the narrative, with notable examples such as Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, and later, Kafka's *The Castle*, and Samuel Beckett's *Molloy* trilogy. Johnathan Ullyot's *The Modernist Presence in Medieval Literature* explores how modernist writers adapted the grail quest into a failed modernist quest. Ullyot differentiates the modernist grail quest from previous iterations in that rather than 'adapting the story of the Grail into a unified and coherent version', these writers 'intentionally failed to make the Grail myth cohere', thus creating 'modernist "continuations" of the Grail narrative, which in turn highlight the Grail narrative as one of the prototypes of failure aesthetics' (14). 'In the modernist failed quest narrative', he elaborates, 'the protagonist is trapped in a world in which the quest is impossible, he makes little if any progress, and yet his desire to go on increases the more he fails'. These quests present a thorough engagement with failure in their presentation of not only failed quests but of unheroic protagonists journeying through ruined and desolate wastelands.

In *The Concept of Modernism*, Ástráður Eysteinnsson identifies the modernist hero as one 'in whom heightened consciousness and social isolation and paralysis go hand in hand, as do the exaltation of individuality and its erasure' (29-30). Theodore Ziolkowski focuses on the indecisiveness of modernist heroes, here referred to as 'hesitant', 'as exemplifying crisis in the cultures that have brought them forth' (3). 'As classical forms were transformed in the face of industrialization, urbanization, commercialization, and other alienating forces', he elaborates, 'so too the hero in his

original purity and immediacy of action had to change' (5). In Ziolkowski's view, these new heroes 'can be viewed as an early symptom of this vast social transformation: an epigone, a man born so late that he is torn between opposing symptoms of belief and value and becomes incapable of the same unthinking action that characterized his heroic predecessors' (5). For Victor Brombert the modern anti-hero represented the blurring of the 'lines of demarcation separating the heroic from the unheroic'. These anti-heroes are presented as 'weak, ineffectual, pale, humiliated, self-doubting, inept, occasionally abject characters – often afflicted with self-consciousness and paralyzing irony' (2). However, they may also be 'capable of unexpected resilience and fortitude' in their refusal or inability to 'conform to traditional models of heroic figures', to 'even stand in opposition to them' (2). In failing to meet the ideal of the heroic figure, they are capable of casting 'doubt on values that have been taken for granted, or were assumed to be unshakable' (2). In contrast to the traditional hero, the failed hero 'challenges our assumptions, raising anew the question of how we see, or wish to see ourselves' (2). In addition to heroes who embodied this aesthetics of failure, modernist literature also saw a proliferation of those heroes questing in barren and hellish landscapes, returning to earlier iterations of the quest narrative in representing failed spaces, notably that of the descent into hell from the epic tradition and the wasteland from medieval Grail narratives. As Ulliot states, Eliot's focus on the motif of the waste land 'serves to deemphasize the hero aspect of the story' (79). 'Eliot's questing protagonist only vaguely appears throughout the poem', shifting 'attention away from the questing knight and toward the motif of the Waste Land and the Wounded King' (79). Inherent in Eliot's poem is a land which desperately needs restoring yet is absent of a hero required to do so. Rachel Falconer points out the tendency for 'modern writers' to 'narrate the quest for selfhood as a descent to Hell and return' to represent 'the material and spiritual dislocations produced in and by Western capitalism as an infernal condition' (27).<sup>20</sup> David Pike states that underworld descents 'exhibit two tendencies, one mythical, the other historical. The former ... involves a hero's rite of passage, a leave-taking from the past and orientation toward the future, and the prophetic voice related to it' (6). The

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<sup>20</sup> See also Michael Thurston's *The Underworld in Twentieth-Century Poetry: From Pound and Eliot to Heaney and Walcott* (2009).

second tendency, ‘the *katabasis*, or journey proper, is intertextual and frequently satirical, ... here, the underworld is a transparently social or political allegory of contemporary life on earth’ (7).<sup>21</sup> The modernist quest thus not only depicted the failure of the quest but reinforced it with failed heroes and failed landscapes, developing an aesthetics of failure as a critique of contemporary existence.

The twentieth century also saw a resurgence of mythic and archetypal scholarship emerge which sought to address this perceived lack of meaning and spiritual significance. Perceiving a lack of spiritual meaning at both an individual and societal level, this scholarship utilised the available quest structure established with the epic and medieval quests as a way to address this failure of modern existence, a development which I will refer to as the archetypal quest.<sup>22</sup> I will here give an overview of this formalisation of the quest structure, primarily focusing on three key figures in this development. The first is Carl Gustav Jung who posited that one could reach psychological and spiritual wholeness through uniting the archetypes, a process he termed ‘individuation’. The second is Joseph Campbell, who used Jung’s theories to develop his hero’s journey which he describes as the fundamental structure present in all world mythologies. Lastly, Northrop Frye migrated these ideas to the field of literary criticism, outlining the pattern of what he termed the quest-romance. However, as I will argue, while the archetypal quest represents the most significant formalisation of and engagement with the quest narrative, it also prioritised values such as the divinely heroic individual, held an antimodern belief in the past as a source of eternal and universally relevant truth, and ignored or disregarded the potential for failure and its implications.

Following his split from Sigmund Freud and Freudian psychoanalysis, Jung formulated his theory of the collective unconscious, positing that ‘personal unconscious’ is built ‘upon a deeper layer, which does not derive from personal experience and is not

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<sup>21</sup> See also David Pike’s *Subterranean Cities* (2005) and Rosalind Williams’ *Notes on the Underground* (2008) on how the expansion of underground space in the twentieth century also contributed to this interest in the underworld.

<sup>22</sup> It should be noted that the term ‘archetype’ was in use long before Jung’s formulation of psychoanalytic archetypal theory. For this reason, my use of the phrase ‘archetypal quest’ does not refer to the standard or exemplary quest but that which developed from the archetypal theory first articulated by Jung and then formalised as the quest-structure by Campbell and Frye.

a personal acquisition but is inborn' (3).<sup>23</sup> Jung stresses that the collective unconscious 'is not individual but universal; in contrast to the personal psyche, it has contents and modes of behaviour that are more or less the same everywhere and in all individuals' (3-4). 'It is', he continues, 'identical in all men and thus constitutes a common psychic substrate of a suprapersonal nature which is present in every one of us' (4). Jung's understanding of the human psyche was based on archetypes that formed the collective unconscious, and individuation is achieved through the unity of the archetypes. He posits that individuals are born with the collective unconscious, that is, a repository of symbols and images that are then expressed through stories, myths, religions, and dreams. 'The contents of the personal unconscious', he states, 'are chiefly the feeling-toned complexes ... they constitute the personal and private side of psychic life. The contents of the collective unconscious ... are known as archetypes' (4). He elaborates that 'as far as the collective unconscious contents are concerned we are dealing with archaic or – I would say – primordial types, that is, with universal images that have existed since the remotest times' (5-6). This idea was immensely attractive to Joseph Campbell, who drew heavily from Jung in his 1949 text *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*.<sup>24</sup> 'The bold and truly epoch-making writings of the psychoanalysts are indispensable to the student of mythology', he declared, 'Freud, Jung, and their followers have demonstrated irrefutably that the logic, the heroes, and the deeds of myth survive into modern times' (4). Campbell utilised the archetypes to trace what he called the hero's journey as a quest pattern that recurs across all world mythology, stating that the 'standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula represented in the rites of passage ... which might be named the nuclear unit of the monomyth' (28).<sup>25</sup> The hero's journey consists of three stages, 'separation or departure', 'trials and victories of initiation', and 'return and reintegration with society' (34). It begins in the 'separation' stage with what Campbell terms the 'call to adventure'

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<sup>23</sup> On the relationship between Freud and Jung and their eventual split see *The Correspondence Between Sigmund Freud and C. G. Jung* (1979), edited by William McGuire.

<sup>24</sup> Campbell was not the first to propose a structure for the hero's journey, see also Otto Rank's *The Myth of the Birth of the Hero* (1902) and Lord Raglan's *The Hero, A Study in Tradition, Myth and Drama* (1936).

<sup>25</sup> The term 'monomyth' was originally coined by Joyce in his novel *Finnegans Wake*. For Campbell's analysis of this novel see *A Skeleton Key to Finnegans Wake* (1947).

which ‘signifies that destiny has summoned the hero and transferred his spiritual center of gravity from within the pale of his society to a zone unknown’ (53). While the hero may initially ‘refuse the call’ he ultimately always accepts his destiny and embarks on the quest, upon which he has a series of encounters with archetypal figures. These figures may help the hero, gifting him with supernatural aid and advice, or may act as a hindrance to or distraction from the quest. Once he has passed the first threshold and surpassed his trials, he is ready to achieve the goal of his journey, the ultimate boon. The hero is not always freely given the boon as a reward, ‘the gods may be oversevere, overcautious, in which case the hero must trick them of their treasure’ (168). Such cases serve to make ‘even the highest gods appear as malignant. Life-hoarding ogres, and the hero who deceives, slays, or appeases them is honored as the savior of the world’ (168). The gain of the ultimate boon serves as the accomplishment of the quest and the end of the initiation stage, after which follows his return. The hero must then return with the ultimate boon to his community, which Campbell describes as ‘the long-forgotten atmosphere where men who are fractions imagine themselves to be complete’ where he must ‘confront society with his ego-shattering, life-redeeming elixir, and take the return blow of reasonable queries, hard resentment, and good people at a loss to comprehend’ (201). His return is symbolised by the ‘crossing of the return threshold’ in which he faces the challenge of retaining the insight he has gained, making use of it, and transmitting it to his community. In the last two stages of his journey, the hero becomes the ‘master of two worlds’, and as a ‘result of his miraculous passage and return’ gains the ‘freedom to live’ (221). The final stages thereby end the hero’s journey witnessing the hero being exalted above his community and becoming truly divine.

Campbell’s monomyth emphasises several recurring aspects that are intrinsic to the archetypal quest: the focus on the individual in possession of a divinely heroic destiny, the function of those encountered during the quest to reinforce the significance of the hero, and the goal of the quest, the ultimate boon which the hero does not attain for his own personal gain but for the betterment of his community. In doing so, it presented an extremely compelling narrative, one that purported to have universal resonance with all modern men and women. This revival of interest in myth in the twentieth century that was spearheaded by Jung and Campbell, Robert Ellwood notes,

surpassed the ‘merely aesthetic: these interpreters of ancient myth said much to lead their public to believe that a rediscovery of meaning in myth could contribute to solving the personal and social problems of those tumultuous times’ (vii). Campbell’s hero’s journey makes clear the seductive appeal of myth in its ability to provide ‘models for the world around, yet at the same time [offer] avenues of eternal return to simpler primordial ages when the values that rule the world were forged’ (1). ‘Their work’, he elaborates, ‘stimulated belief that the recovery of meanings enigmatically encoded in ancient mythologies could do much to heal deep midcentury wounds in both individual and collective psyches’ (2). It is unsurprising that this evocation for a return to myth ‘resonated with an antimodern counterpoint to the century’s giddy devotion to “progress,” with its terrible shadowside of war, devastation, and destructive ideology’ (2). Campbell, in particular, emerged from mythological scholarship to attain public acclaim and popularity. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* and his posthumously published *The Power of Myth* both made the *New York Times* bestseller list, with the latter broadcasted as a series of interviews with Bill Moyes. Campbell would gain a further boost in popularity due to his influence on George Lucas’ massively popular *Star Wars* trilogy. Archetypal analysis was to also become ubiquitous in literary criticism after Northrop Frye published *Anatomy of Criticism* in 1957, which thoroughly engaged with Jung’s ideas, entitled its third essay ‘Archetypal Criticism: Theory of Myths’. Frye defines the archetype as ‘a typical or recurring image ... which connects one poem with another and thereby helps to unify and integrate our literary experience’ (99). ‘And as the archetype is the communicable symbol’, he elaborates, ‘archetypal criticism is primarily concerned with literature as a social fact and as a mode of communication. By the study of conventions and genres, it attempts to fit poems into the body of poetry as a whole’ (99). Frye identifies romance as one of the four archetypal narratives, which is given literary form through ‘a major or climactic adventure ... the quest’ (187). Citing the ‘successful quest’ as the ‘complete form of the romance’, Frye outlines a quest structure similar to Campbell’s in which the hero passes through three stages: ‘the stage of the perilous journey and the preliminary minor adventures; the crucial struggle, usually some kind of battle in which either the hero or his foe, or both must die; and the exaltation of the hero’ (187). As Elwood points out, Frye ‘did much to make “myth

analysis” of Shakespeare and other literature an academic vogue’, thereby setting the precedent for scholarly identification of archetypal quest structures in an array of texts (3).<sup>26</sup> That the hero’s journey appeared to be ubiquitous and have equal resonance regardless of where it is applied, from ancient mythology, to modern existence, to a long time ago in a galaxy far far away, seemed testament to its universality.

However, as Marc Manganaro states, this ‘comparatavist’ method is a ‘system or idea that unites, destroying variation in the process’ creating ‘far-ranging encyclopedic texts that, in uniformitarian fashion, persuade through their very scope that human nature and endeavour can be reduced to a few fundamental ideas’ (17). Hugh Underhill similarly identifies as a feature of modernist aesthetics, that it ‘often seems to reach back to some original more “completed” kind of thought or knowledge, not hopelessly lacking coherence like modern knowledge’ (2-3). ‘The powerful attraction of myth’, he argues, ‘goes hand-in-hand with the modern interest, on the one hand, in buried forms of consciousness or the “unconscious”, and on the other, in attempts to synthesize new kinds of “order”’ (6). In Underhill’s view this ‘often leads to misrepresentations of our modern situation, to exaggeration of the valuelessness in the modern world of public and social roles’ (4). He questions ‘what kind of transcendent “truth” can be said to reside in subjectivity, whether it can be accorded this value as a set of metaphysical absolute, if ... subjectivity is itself culturally and historically constituted’ (4). The result is ‘a dissociation of sensibility: inner life overwhelms communal experience, self-realization outweighs engagement with “history”’, creating a focus on subjectivity that underrepresents ‘the extent to which the alienated state of consciousness ... is socio-historically determined’ (4, 300). The effectiveness of this foundational quest scholarship spearheaded by Jung, Campbell, and Frye, and adapted by other proponents of the archetypal quest in the last century was strengthened by its claims to be universally applicable and reveal primordial, eternal truths. The result of this claim was not only the exaggeration of the ills of modern life, thereby reinforcing the sense of failure they perceived, but also the disregarding of how the political and the social

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<sup>26</sup> See, for example, Harold Bloom’s *The Hero’s Journey* (2009), Maureen Murdock’s *The Heroine’s Journey: Woman’s Quest for Wholeness* (1990), and Evans Lansing Smith’s *The Hero Journey in Literature* (1997).



informed this failure. The approach I take in this thesis is therefore in contrast to this. Rather than viewing the quest narrative as a totalising structure through which universal truths can be accessed, I analyse how the quest narrative has been used and adapted in contemporary literature as a response to localised contemporary failures.

### 1.3 Methodology

Although this section's critique of the era's tendency of totalising narratives and universal truths can be most associated with the movement of aesthetic and cultural postmodernism, in this thesis, I do not analyse the texts presented as postmodern deconstructions or subversions of the quest genre. To do so would imply that the quest has previously maintained an unchanged tradition, which I have argued against in this chapter, upon which such deconstruction or subversion would be enacted. It would not only ignore the centuries of recontextualizations and adaptations of the genre but also assume that its epic and medieval foundations are more rigid than I have argued them to be. Furthermore, in this thesis I follow in the same vein as Kumkum Sangari in her critique of the postmodern mentality of 'incredulity towards metanarratives' as Jean-François Lyotard famously termed it (Lyotard xxiv). She argued that the 'crisis of legitimation (of meaning and knowledge systems) becomes a strangely vigorous "master narrative" in its own right, since it sets out to rework or "process" the knowledge systems of the world in its own image' (184). 'Postmodern skepticism', she states, 'is the complex product of a historical conjuncture as both symptom and critique of the contemporary economic and social formation of the West' (183). For Sangari it is more symptom than critique, citing postmodernism's 'tendency to universalize its epistemological preoccupations', so that 'the world contracts into the West' and 'the West expands into the world' (183). Postmodern skepticism, she argues, does account for the fact that the postmodern 'crisis of meaning is not everyone's crisis (even in the West) or that there are different modes of de-essentialization which are socially and politically grounded and mediated by separate perspectives, goals, and strategies for change in other countries' (184). In this thesis, I therefore follow Ihab Hassan and David L. Pike in their assertions that quest narratives are adapted to and reflect specific contexts. In *Passage through Hell: Modernist Descents, Medieval Underworlds*, Pike

focuses specifically on journeys into the underworld, however, his argument can be extended to accommodate this study's understanding of quest narratives. He states that the descent narrative has 'over the millennia gathered around itself an ever-increasing constellation of meanings' so that 'the topographical movement of descent and return within the motif equally describes the accretion of meaning to it in history' (2). Thereby, the descent becomes 'a fundamentally allegorical form: the core fact of death is imbued with the hero's individual past, the past of his society, and the past of the motif itself' (2). Hassan makes a similar argument in *Selves at Risk: Patterns of Quest in Contemporary American Letters*, stating that 'the traditional form of quest, like myth itself, returns, revised or revived, in our skeptical clime; and in this "eternal return" authors invent new styles to suit current urgencies' (204). In order to do so, I identify five aspects of the failed quest that will be examined in each of the novels: the individual who undertakes the quest, their motivation to quest, the space of quest as defined as a space of failure, the encounters with other characters on the journey, and finally, the quester's failure and the implications of that failure as it pertains to their society. These five aspects draw on Hassan's text, which discusses the subject, motive, and space of quest, as well as Campbell's focus on the heroic individual, figures encountered on the journey, and the achievement of the ultimate boon. Through, however, the focus on failure and the failed quest, the novels present a fundamental difference in their representation of these aspects. Each of these aspects has a basis in the long tradition of the quest narrative and their various iterations as discussed above, but have been adapted and updated to respond to contemporary anxieties, which are here defined as failures.

Like Hassan, I refer to the protagonist of the quest not as a hero but as a 'quester', as what defines these characters is their embarking on their journeys rather than their heroism or heroic deeds. Heroes were no stranger to failure in pursuit of their goal, often failing because of some personal flaw or sin that renders them unworthy of the quest, or because they have yet to learn the right lesson, surpass their trials, or accept their destiny, or were ennobled by their failure. This places emphasis on the individual as failure in the forms described above, depicting personal failures, temporary failures, and alternative failures. However, by taking blame away from the individual as a failure,

this thesis will explore how the failure of the quest is not due to a fatal flaw on the part of the protagonist, but rather the nature of the quest renders success impossible. The questing protagonists I examine also serve to challenge the notion of the quest as the sole purview of male, Western heroes. They explore the implications of using a genre to represent the experiences of those who often are either absent from such narratives or relegated to the side-lines.

As I mentioned above, one of Campbell's initial stages of the hero's journey is the 'call to adventure', when the hero is summoned by destiny to embark on his quest. In order to undertake the quest, the protagonist must have a strong motivation. Hassan likens the quester to the adventurer, and in doing so, limits their motivations to reasons such as

heredity, adrenalin, whim, boredom, rage, loss, rivalry, eroticism, and maladjustment to civilisation; the search for fame, self-worth, wholeness, enlightenment; a mysterious nostalgia for otherness; the lure of things difficult and strange; the urge to confront fear, death really, and to master, if only for a moment, their singular fate'. (47)

Yet none of the figures discussed in this thesis view their quest as an adventure or assume any of the potential motivations mentioned by Hassan, nor are they called forth by destiny as presented by Campbell. The quests in this thesis are ones for survival or in which the protagonist is so invested in the outcome that failure is at the least a devastating blow and at worst fatal. The examination of the questers' motivation to undertake their journey also functions as a critique of the notion of 'striving to fail' which I explore above in the section on forms of individual failure. For the quests to be actually worth undertaking, the protagonist needs to have in mind an achievable goal and set out to attain it. The quester needs to believe that through hard work and determination they can and will be successful. This definition negates the type of failure that strives for an impossible perfection or utopia – the goal must be, in the mind of the protagonist, realistically achievable. The nature of the quests examined in this thesis makes it so that setting out in pursuit of failure is not an option for the questers, the stakes are too high and the consequences too great to consider doing so.

During the protagonist's quests, they will inevitably encounter other characters who will offer differing perspectives. The quest narrative as a genre is most resistant to the inclusion of other voices being narratively structured around the exploits of a highly significant individual. Yet the texts analysed in this thesis differ from the archetypal ones depicted by Jung and Campbell in that other characters function as more than aids or obstacles in the individual's journey. They have their own lives, desires, and journeys, their own survival and success to consider, and are most often unaware or unconcerned with the protagonist's quest. Furthermore, while the quest can encourage black and white notions of morality in its presentation of heroes and villains, it can also critique them, a practice that all the texts I discuss engage in through the quester's encounters with other people.

The protagonist's motivation to quest and the space in which they quest are often interconnected. They pursue a goal or set out to address a failure that is caused by or emerges from that space. If the quester's failure is not entirely due to their own personal flaws or lack of motivation, there must be another essential factor that causes their inability to succeed. This is explored in the examination of the questing landscape, that is, the space in which the majority of the quest takes place. This generally allows the protagonist to develop and be challenged, but also gives the author the opportunity to depict the world they created and define the odds that the quester will have to contend with in order to be successful. It is from the depiction of the landscape that it becomes clear that the quest will result in failure, a realisation that the reader often comes to before the protagonist. In their edited collection *The Material Culture of Failure: When Things Do Wrong*, Timothy Carroll, David Jeevendrampillai, Aaron Parkhurst, and Julie Shackelford approach 'a general theory of failure' defined as occurring 'when objectification ceases to adhere ... that in the individual subject's (or collective societal) project of inscribing themselves in the world, failure happens when the material and social stuff of that inscription behaves in ways other than intended' (2). Failure is defined here as 'a moment of breakage between the reality of the present and the anticipated future', carrying 'moral gravity as what *ought* to have happened, what *should* be the case, has not come to pass' (2). This edited collection has a dual focus on material failure, that is when things, objects, or artefacts malfunction or behave

incorrectly, and more relevant to this thesis, the materiality of failure. The latter focus explores how ‘failures of state’ – infrastructural failure, democratic failure – are ‘inscribed in material forms’ (6). In the quests I examine, the failure the novel is concerned with is often embodied in the questing landscape, meaning that the protagonist must directly negotiate with this failure in order to quest. While this is represented in the material form of the space, failure can also manifest in the immaterial in that it can also be felt as a perception or pervasive feeling of fear or futility. Thus, the material and immaterial both inform and contribute to this sense of failure so to make the questing landscapes, as I define them in this thesis, spaces of failure.

As I have mentioned above, the quest narrative is a genre highly concerned with success. While it can be said that the journey is more important than the destination, the goal-oriented nature of the narrative renders the end as what imbues the entire quest with its meaning. This is even more so in the case of failure. Most scholarship on quest tends to ignore or disregard both the potential for failure and its implications. Both Campbell and Frye view the successful quest as the only complete version, while Hassan tends to focus more on ‘risk’. Yet the four quests in this thesis are not merely incomplete, they do end, but end unsuccessfully. Campbell places emphasis on the achievement of the individual as providing the capability for curing his community. Yet the spaces of failure within these texts are incapable of being healed by one individual, and by presenting them so, these writers contradict the notion of the divinely important saviour of the archetypal quest. The quests function as socio-political critiques of the causes of the protagonist’s failure, thereby shifting blame from the individual to the conditions that rendered success impossible. Yet these narratives, despite depicting such failures, do not advocate for nihilism, apathy, or inaction on behalf of the individual. They show that these quests retain value beyond judgements of success and failure, not by downplaying the devastation of failure, valorising resilience in the face of failure, or dispensing consoling silver-lining platitudes. Rather the bleakness of the spaces of failure and of the individual’s own failure also throw into starker contrast the moments of love, resistance, empathy, and community.

In this chapter, I have explored how the quest narrative developed focusing on key moments including the establishing of the heroic quest in epic literature, its

reinforcement in medieval literature with the motif of the Holy Grail, the engagement with failure aesthetics in modernist literature, and its formalisation in archetypal criticism. In doing so, I have argued that the longevity of the quest narrative lies in the fact that it has been a genre flexible to adaptation since its inception, able to change to suit the needs of its current user. The fact that the quest is a genre highly concerned with success makes it an ideal vehicle to examine ideas of failure. While failure criticism generally tends to focus on individual failure, in this thesis I focus on how through the quest narrative contemporary authors can explore failure as a socio-political critique of both globalised and localised systems and institutions. In the next four chapters, I will therefore use the theoretical framework outlined and the methodology I developed in this chapter to analyse how Cormac McCarthy, Michael Ondaatje, Julia Kristeva, and Basma Abdel Aziz represent failure in their novels.

## 2. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

The apocalypse is currently experiencing its most significant return to the American cultural imagination since the Cold War. The turn of the millennium has brought with it a proliferation of post-apocalyptic literature, films, television, and video games. Post-apocalyptic imagery has a specific resonance for American audiences not solely due to the series of real-world events in America that appear apocalyptic but also for the implications that it has for the wide-spread notion of American Exceptionalism. There exists an inherent paradox within post-apocalyptic narratives, that if the apocalypse signals the end of the world, how can there be anything to depict afterwards (Berger 5-6). Yet the post-apocalyptic narrative is a genre dedicated to questioning and depicting what does remain in the world following its destruction, and perhaps more significantly what happens next. Cormac McCarthy's 2006 novel *The Road* is an essential literary example of this fixation. Set in a post-apocalyptic America suffering from the after-effects of an unidentified cataclysm, the narrative follows an unnamed father and son as they slowly trek through this barren wasteland in search of a safe, warm home on the southern coast. With the land having lost its ability to create life, the last few remaining humans must forage and scavenge what they can, relying on a limited supply of tinned food, filtered water, and the last traces of gasoline they can extract from abandoned vehicles and containers. In addition to battling the elements and the constant threat of starvation, the man and boy live in terror of fearsome gangs of cannibals who now roam the desolated country. The man and boy navigate this dangerous terrain in the hope of forging a sustainable existence by the sea. Yet upon reaching this goal they are disappointed that instead of the warm, colourful coastline they were hoping to call home, they find a space as lifelessly cold, grey, and devoid of life as the rest of the barren landscape.

Lydia Cooper has previously connected the genres of quest and post-apocalypse in her identification of the novel as an apocalyptic grail narrative. 'The motifs of the Waste Land, the dying Fisher King, and the potentially unattainable healing balm in the cup of Christ', she argues, 'provide particularly apt metaphors through which *The Road* examines pervasive apocalyptic fears in order to explore if and how the human project

may be preserved' (219). While I agree with this assessment, in this chapter I approach the novel not as a grail narrative but as fitting within the broader genre of quest narrative in order to examine McCarthy's treatment of failure. I begin this chapter by contextualising *The Road* as an American post-apocalyptic novel particularly concerned with American Exceptionalism, questioning whether it can function as a warning for the future, or a critique of the present. I will next focus on the man's role as the novel's quester, identifying his primary concern and sole reason for survival as his love for his son. This relationship, I argue, sustains the man and allows him to locate meaning in the meaningless post-apocalyptic world. I will next analyse the motivation to quest, analysing the motif of 'carrying the fire' that McCarthy repeatedly invokes in the novel, and how this symbol gives the man and boy a method of understanding and expressing their reasons for survival in order to protect against the constant temptation to give up. In the next section, I discuss the two kinds of encounters the man and boy face on their journey, that challenge their perception of themselves and of their quest. I will then argue that the novel presents a space of failure that is informed by twenty-first century American anxieties, specifically ecological, economical, and ideological. The last section will explore how through the failure of the quest in concert with the devastated landscape, McCarthy's novel functions less as a warning for but more of a prediction of the future. If there is any hope in McCarthy's novel, this chapter concludes, it is not in the future of a humanity doomed to failure but rather in the love a father and son bear for each other.

The post-apocalyptic novel has become so pervasive in contemporary literature that it can descend into the formulaic – 'everyone knows how the world ends', Michael Chabon declares in his often-quoted review of *The Road*.<sup>27</sup> Initially there is 'radiation, plague, an asteroid, or some other cataclysm [that] kills most of humankind', while those that remain are left to 'mutate, lapse into feudalism, or revert to prehistoric brutality' ("After the Apocalypse"). 'Old cults are revived with their knives and brutal gods', he continues, 'while tiny noble bands cling to the tatters of the lost civilization, preserving knowledge of machinery, agriculture, and the missionary position against some future renaissance, and confronting their ancestors' legacy of greatness and

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<sup>27</sup> See also Gary Wolfe's chapter on the post-apocalyptic formula, 'The Remaking of Zero'.



destruction’ (“After the Apocalypse”).<sup>28</sup> Indeed, apocalyptic images have long held a place within the American cultural imagination, shifting ‘from its origins as the story of the annihilation of a sinful human world to become, in novel form, the story of the collapse of modernity itself’ (Hicks 2).<sup>29</sup> Mary Manjikian describes their function as ‘creating new discourse and interrogating old myths ... inventing and analysing possible new futures and considering their ethical implications’ (158). It is worth questioning, however, whether post-apocalyptic visions like McCarthy’s can actually be effective as a warning that inspires political action or whether their presentations of inescapable global failure only provoke nihilism and apathy. The effectiveness of apocalyptic images as inspiring political change has been debated by environmental critics. Lawrence Buell cites apocalypse as ‘the single most powerful master metaphor that the contemporary environmental imagination has at its disposal ... The rhetoric of apocalypticism implies that the fate of the world hinges on the arousal of the imagination to a sense of crisis’ (285). Greg Garrard also notes apocalyptic rhetoric’s capability ‘of galvanising activities, converting the undecided and ultimately, perhaps, of influencing government and commercial policy’, however, also notes its tendency ‘to polarize responses, prodding skeptics towards scoffing dismissal and potentially inciting believers to confrontation and even violence’ (114-5). In order for apocalyptic images to function as a warning requires the implication of an alternative future as a possibility, not solely ‘anticipating the end of the world, but ... attempting to avert it by persuasive means’ (107-108). As Garrard concludes, ‘Only if we imagine that the planet has a future, after all, are we likely to take responsibility for it’ (116). In the novel, failure does not only characterise the quest itself but also the space the man and boy are questing in. Upon reaching the sea, the man and boy realise that their quest for a place

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<sup>28</sup> While post-apocalyptic and dystopian narratives can be conflated, in this thesis I regard them as presenting different spaces of failure for the protagonists to quest in. While both can come about through a disaster or cataclysm of some kind, post-apocalyptic narratives present the aftermath as a collapse of social and political institutions while dystopian narratives present the emergent totalitarian or authoritarian state. See also Hicks (2016) 7-8. I will discuss how the dystopian narrative depicts spaces of failure with my discussion of Abdel Aziz’s novel in Chapter 5.

<sup>29</sup> See John Hay’s *Postapocalyptic Fantasies in Antebellum American Literature* (2017), Brodman and Doan’s *Apocalyptic Chic: Visions of the Apocalypse and Post-Apocalypse in Literature and Visual Arts* (2017), Richard Kyle’s *Apocalyptic Fever: End-Time Prophecies in Modern America* (2012), Claire Curtis’s *Postapocalyptic Fiction and the Social Contract: We’ll Not Go Home Again* (2010), and Andrew Tate’s *Apocalyptic Fiction* (2017).

that is safe, warm, and vibrant is doomed to failure. McCarthy presents a vision of the future so bleak and hopeless that it contradicts the impulse to quest by depicting a world which negates the necessity of human endeavour.

McCarthy's unrelentingly bleak image of post-apocalyptic America and his undermining of the value of human endeavour follow in what John Cant identifies as 'the overriding theme of McCarthy's work', that is, the 'critique of American Exceptionalism in particular and Western gnosis in general' (276). Tracing the development of American exceptionalism from its Puritan origins to twentieth-century literature and film, Deborah Madsen states in her eponymous book that it 'permeates every period of American history and is the single most powerful agent in a series of arguments that have been fought down the centuries concerning the identity of America and Americans' (1). Donald Pease's *The New American Exceptionalism* focuses on its evolution following the collapse of the Soviet Union into a 'fantasy through which U.S. citizens bring ... contradictory political and cultural descriptions into correlation with one another through the desires that make them meaningful' (8). It is a fantasy, he elaborates, because it allows U.S. citizens to articulate that America was set apart from all other nations, even if they conceptualise this exception in different ways. For this reason, American exceptionalism can connote a belief in uniqueness or distinctness, whether that be defined by merely difference or anomaly, in providing an exemplary model for other nations, or in being excepted from the rule of law that other nations are excepted to follow. It is a concept subject to change, Pease notes, in situations where 'one version of American exceptionalism no longer suited extant geopolitical demands, policymakers reconfigured its elements to address the change in geopolitical circumstances' (9). Manjikian states that 'the apocalyptic novel represents a direct affront to the narrative of American exceptionalism' (158). *The Road*, she states, confronts the reader with 'an America which is no longer unique or special in its relationship to the rest of the world or to God', rather it is a 'world which has been abandoned or a world which never had that special relationship – since it was a construct rather than something real' (211). Yet *The Road* goes further than depicting a world in which America and Americans were not spared or did not triumph over the cataclysmic event that brought about the post-apocalyptic state. I argue that while these

narratives depict the fallout of a global apocalypse, McCarthy specifically emphasises America's culpability in causing it. *The Road* presents this heightened assumption of blame, I argue, as due to America's position as the global superpower and the mentality of exceptionalism that informs both domestic and foreign policy. The catastrophe McCarthy depicts is global yet the protagonists journey through the devastated American landscape, a space of failure he depicts as informed by twenty-first century American anxieties, be they environmental, economic, or ideological. In representing the fallout of such anxieties as not limited to America, McCarthy depicts a world which not only undermines and confronts American Exceptionalism but blames it for the end of the world.

## 2.1 The man as the novel's quester

Ashley Kunsu notes that 'the reader has greater access to the father's thoughts than to those of any other McCarthy character, and as a result he is rounder, fuller and more sympathetic' (62).<sup>30</sup> The central defining aspect of the man as the novel's questing protagonist is the love he bears for his son. His love forms the text's emotional core, with the man's worry for the boy overwhelming his darkest moments while simultaneously sustaining him by giving him a reason to carry on questing. In this section, I argue that the man imbues his son with divinity in order to cope with what he perceives as a hopeless and meaningless world, thereby assigning the quest and himself as the quester with spiritual significance, even ordained by God himself. With the bleak and desolate landscape, the man is constantly confronted with the fact that what once gave meaning to pre-apocalyptic existence is no longer relevant: 'The world shrinking down about a raw core of parsible [sic] entities.'<sup>31</sup> The names of things slowly following those things into oblivion. Colors. The names of birds. Things to eat. Finally the names of things one believed to be true' (93). The man notes how as referents such as colours,

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<sup>30</sup> On interiority in McCarthy's novels see Cooper (2011). On the heroic in McCarthy see John Dudley's *McCarthy's Heroes: Revising Masculinity* (2013).

<sup>31</sup> The term 'parsible' provides an example of McCarthy's coinage of words in his fiction, verb 'to parse'. In addition, McCarthy repeatedly severely limits his use of apostrophes to indicate speech or in contractions (for example 'can't' and 'don't' are written 'cant' and 'dont'). On McCarthy's use of language and syntax in the novel see Kristjan Mavri's 'Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* Revisited: Memory and Language in Post-Apocalyptic Fiction' (2013).

animals, and food become exceedingly and increasingly rare if not extinct, so do their signifiers. The speed and ease at which this decline of meaning occurs destabilises him, makes him aware of how fragile his past existence was: 'More fragile than he would have thought. How much was gone already? The sacred idiom shorn of its referents and so of its reality. Drawing down like something trying to preserve the heat. In time to wink out forever' (93). The variety of ways the novel negotiates between meaning and meaninglessness is an aspect of McCarthy's novel that critics often note and discuss. Russell M. Hillier notes how 'the narrative voice often merges with the father's consciousness, permitting readers a window upon the father's inner effort to discover value or meaning' (263). Kunsza describes the novel as 'a linguistic journey towards redemption, a search for meaning and pattern in a seemingly meaningless world—a search that, astonishingly, succeeds' (59). Shelly Rambo states that 'McCarthy catches the reader in a schizophrenic, and distinctively American, postapocalyptic crisis of meaning: between the craving for a happy ending (for resolution, for redemption) and the recognition of its impossibility (there is, in Christian terms, no resurrection ahead)' (101). While these critics point out the central role of the boy in locating meaning as providing the novel with an aspect of hope and redemption, I argue that such criticism overlooks the boy's role in simultaneously reinforcing and contradicting meaninglessness for his father. That the man feels keenly that he is one of the last remaining humans capable to assigning meaning to remnants of the past world, however, is also a more significant aspect than these critics allow for. The boy's relation to the world as a child without any point of reference to the previous world makes the man all the more desperate to pass on his memories.

The discrepancy between how the man and boy experience the post-apocalyptic world is that while the man attempts to sustain aspects of the past he considers meaningful and valuable, the boy is far less likely to cling onto the last remnants of a past which never existed for him. This is prominently exemplified by how they relate to the items they use, whether they be supplies loaded on a cart which must be dragged down the road, or those deemed essential enough to be carried in backpacks packed in preparation for a quick getaway. As I will now discuss, the man reads into these items spiritual significance and assigns their use or discarding ritualistic significance, while

the boy due to his lack of any point of reference for these items deems them unnecessary for survival and therefore expendable.<sup>32</sup> The man's links to the past are embodied in the contents of his wallet where he keeps these items as long as possible, carrying 'his billfold about till it wore a cornershaped [sic] hole in his trousers' (52). The subsequent discarding of these formerly significant objects is performed in a highly ritualistic manner, with the man taking the time to carefully lay out and examine them:

Then one day he sat by the roadside and took it out and went through the contents. Some money, credit cards. His driver's license. A picture of his wife. He spread everything out on the blacktop. Like gaming cards. He pitched the sweatblackened [sic] piece of leather into the woods and sat holding the photograph. Then he laid it down in the road also and then he stood and they went on. (52-3)

The items he carries and finally decides to discard are highly symbolic of what the man and the world has lost, as is the order in which he carries out this ritual. First, his money and credit cards are rendered completely useless, former representations of wealth which have lost their ability to signify anything. His driver's license then follows, a possible source of identity for the nameless man that no longer contains any significance as human beings are increasingly divided into predator and prey. Lastly, his love and memory of his wife, symbolised here by a photograph of her, is the strongest connection to his previous life and therefore the most difficult to discard. He ultimately lays the photo 'down in the road', a symbolic burial he was unable to give her in real life. Yet memories of his wife still haunt him throughout the text, indicating that despite this ritualistic discarding he remains unable to definitively break from the past. Furthermore, his regard of this final stage of the ritual as the most important illuminates his relationship with his son by emphasising his need to imbue those he loves with spiritual and ritualistic significance in order to cope with the lack of meaning in the present.

When the casting away of artefacts deemed meaningless is performed by the boy, it is significantly easier and less ritualistic, with the boy being less prone to form

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<sup>32</sup> On ritual in *The Road* see Matthew Fledderjohann's 'How to Continue: Sustaining Existence through Beckettian Ritual in McCarthy's *The Road*' (2013) and Philip's Snyder 'Hospitality in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*' (2008).

attachments to objects than his father. This is evidenced by his treatment of a flute, carved by the man out of cane found by the road and handed down as a gift. In describing the bequeathing of this gift, the man states,

The boy took it wordlessly. After a while he fell back and after a while the man could hear him playing. A formless music for the age to come. Or perhaps the last music on earth called up from out of the ashes of its ruin. The man turned and looked back at him. He was lost in concentration. The man thought he seemed some sad and solitary changeling child announcing the arrival of a traveling spectacle in shire and village who does not know that behind him the players have all been carried off by wolves. (81)

Like the items in his billfold, the man treats the flute with ritualistic significance, recalling the tradition of passing down heirlooms from father to son. Yet for the boy, who is ignorant of the significance of creating music in the old world, soon loses interest in the instrument after this initial engagement. Unlike the man's ritualistic discarding, the moment the boy disposes of the flute is not depicted in the narrative, indeed the boy only recalls he did so after being prompted by his father. From the man's perspective, the 'formless music' his son produces is either the sound of 'the age to come' or the last notes that will ever be played. Yet this significance the man attaches is meaningless to the boy who quickly loses the flute somewhere unknown along the road, mirroring his inability to connect to most objects from the pre-apocalyptic world. Similarly, the man and boy are never shown using a vehicle in order to travel. Their interactions with cars and trucks are limited to using them for shelter and siphoning off the last remnants of gasoline from them. The boy is only mentioned sporadically as playing with a toy truck which he has had from infancy, even forgetting its existence until it is unearthed from the cart by the man. His association of trucks and trains with toys or modes of transportation is increasingly diminished as all the vehicles encountered on the road are either commandeered by the gangs of cannibals or have been long abandoned and useful only as temporary shelter. When the boy identifies an abandoned train just off the road, the man places him in the driver's seat and treats him as he would any child, making 'train noises and diesel horn noises' in order to encourage him to play (191). Yet the man comes to the realisation that like the music of before such sounds must be utterly

meaningless to the boy. While the man and boy associate different meanings with the function of objects encountered on the road, McCarthy shows that fundamentally all things in this world are resigned to the same fate. Like many manmade objects, the train will remain in the world long after it has been divested of all function and meaning. This loss of meaning is not only occurring with objects but with anything which once gave the past life a sense of order. The pervasive disorder which permeates the post-apocalyptic world is established from the beginning of the journey, when the man is unable to state definitively what month or year it is, 'He thought the month was October but he wasn't sure. He hadn't kept a calendar for years' (2). This is reiterated towards the end of the novel in the father's finding of an ornate sextant on board a ship wreck. Once paramount to measuring the position of celestial bodies for marine navigation, the dark clouds which constantly block out the stars render it useless. The road is similarly littered with objects which once were indispensable for human life – electronics, money, food seeds – but now are deemed unnecessary and ignored or discarded, a fact that the man constantly struggles with while the boy can easily accept it.

The dissolution of meaning as a defining aspect of the post-apocalyptic landscape that McCarthy repeatedly emphasises functions as more than a consequence of the cataclysm. It presents one of the central struggles for the protagonist. In a world where they have to contend with the harsh elements and roving gangs of cannibals, McCarthy posits that not being able to locate a sense of meaning may be more devastating to both the individual and the world:

He walked out in the gray light and stood and he saw for a brief moment the absolute truth of the world. The cold relentless circling of the intestate earth. Darkness implacable. The blind dogs of the sun in their running. The crushing black vacuum of the universe. And somewhere two hunted animals trembling like ground-foxes in their cover. (138)

As a coping mechanism in face of the 'essential truth' of the indifference of the universe and their place within it, the man must elevate the significance of their quest. The man's identification as a quester functions to give their lives the meaning and purpose that the post-apocalyptic world has negated, and the man so develops a specific reason to survive, the protection of his son. Debbie Olson introduces her edited collection *The*

*Child in Post-Apocalyptic Cinema* by noting that ‘in many post-apocalyptic films, children play a central role in the survival of and hope for humanity’ (x). There is, she states, a ‘fascination with the image of the child with the framework of the end of humanity as we know it’. ‘The image’, she continues, ‘of a soft, smiling face of an angelic child who is positioned amidst the horrific destruction of the modern world fills us with a tantalizing brew of dread, voyeuristic fascination, and ultimately, a reason to survive’ (x). Thus, within apocalyptic fiction, children and childhood can function ‘as symbols of past, present, and future notions of humanity, as saviours, destroyers, and finally, as bearers of courage and hope for us all’ (x). In an attempt to cope with meaninglessness, the man perceives his son as having the divinity and significance he sees disappearing from the world. He utilises religious terms and imagery in relation to the protection of his son, stating ‘My job is to take care of you. I was appointed to do that by God’ (80). He does not only assign his quest with divine significance but his son too, imbuing the boy with godlike qualities, describing him as a ‘golden chalice, good to house a god’, and ultimately asks ‘What if I said that he’s a god?’ (3, 78, 183). This is the only belief he can still hold on to: ‘He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: If he is not the word of God God never spoke’ (3). The man’s desperate need to assume divinity in his son as a method of coping with this meaninglessness is often overlooked with critics or addressed by perceiving that same divinity in the boy themselves. John Vanderheide notes that the man is first and foremost driven by ‘his relationship to his son, whose protection he considers to be his sole, divinely appointed function’ (111). Allen Josephs argues that ‘[t]he textual case for God, or more specifically a Christ-like figure in the boy, difficult to imagine without some a priori God, however aloof, comprises more evidence than the negative case’ (137). Yet, as Cooper states, ‘the father’s obsession with identifying the boy as the vessel for divine healing draws attention to the importance of signification’ (234). ‘Nameless and with limited access to a memory deeply affected by trauma’, she argues, ‘the novel’s dying father attempts to find the mathematic limit of his universe, that sine qua non of humanity without which the human race cannot (and, indeed, does not deserve to) survive’ (234). The man copes with his present existence by believing that his child is more than he appears, and perhaps the most important individual left on the earth,



humankind's last hope for the future. However, while one could be tempted to read into the boy the same divine qualities his father perceives within him, McCarthy deliberately provides no indication that the boy is capable of such power. Rather, the man imbues his son with religious significance in the hopes that this will render him safe from harm. In order to motivate himself to carry on the quest, he must find in his son the meaning that has been lost in the world.

## 2.2 The man's motivation to quest

The necessity of undertaking the quest in *The Road* is made plain from the beginning of the narrative, with the father declaring that the pair 'were moving south' as there would be 'no surviving another winter here' (2). The south is immediately established as the goal of the quest, not simply as a general direction but as a specific destination. They are aiming to create a new home somewhere by the sea where they would be warm and safe from the constant threat of death of McCarthy's landscape. Yet while initially framed as a mere attempt for survival, the man and boy's motives for questing are gradually revealed to be more complex. McCarthy repeatedly invokes the man's commitment to the boy's protection and survival as the primary motivation behind his quest. The boy is affirmed as being the man's only reason for continuing down the road, with McCarthy repeatedly making it clear that the man would completely lose the will to live without his son. In an indicative conversation between the two which occurs early in the narrative, the son asks his father what he would do if he died:

'If you died I would want to die too.

So you could be with me?

Yes. So I could be with you' (9).

This motivation is further affirmed by the boy's late mother who, in a conversation with her husband which is recalled in flashback, states, 'The one thing I can tell you is that you won't survive for yourself. I know because I would never have come this far' (59). She is understanding of the co-dependent dynamic between the two, wherein both are dependent on the other for survival, the boy with his need for protection and the man with his need for motivation to keep going. It is specifically the preservation of his son,

and not of himself that motivates him. The man is aware that any time he has left is limited due to the unspecified fatal illness he is suffering from – unsurprising when taken into consideration that the very air they breathe is toxic, necessitating the wearing of cotton masks. His gradually worsening cough serves as a constant reminder that he will eventually be forced to abandon his son, leaving him to fend for himself in the bleak wasteland. This imbues the man with a desperate urgency to locate a safe place for his son, grasping at anything to assure himself that his son will be protected after his death.

In identifying their motivation for embarking on their quest the man and boy repeatedly give voice to a specific sense of purpose, described in the novel as the need to keep ‘carrying the fire’ (87). This is repeatedly invoked throughout the text, often after a traumatic event as both are in need of consolation. Towards the end of the narrative, the father is on his deathbed and assures the boy that the fire is always inside him. The exact nature of what it means to carry the fire is the subject of much debate by critics. It is most often defined as supporting notions of humanity, hope, and civilisation, with the man and boy invoked as the sole carriers of all these ideals which are absent from McCarthy’s setting. Cant, for example, views the fire as representing the ‘vitality that burns within the ardent heart, the mystery that is the spark of life itself and that needs no reason to exist’ (271). Jay Ellis argues that the fire is that of civilisation, the man and boy trying to keep alive the last spark of kindness and human decency left in the world (*No Place for Home* 30). Daniel Luttrull expands this argument to align the characters with the mythic archetype of Prometheus, in which fire is stolen from the gods in order to civilise humanity. Yet, Luttrull argues, this is not a civilisation embodied by ‘social or moral progress’, rather a return to society’s conventional morality exemplified by ‘simple charity..., a regard for grace and beauty, a father’s love for his son, the choice to live without preying on others’ (25). A common thread is detectable in these various possible interpretations of what the fire they are carrying symbolises, that the boy is keeping the fire of hope, civilisation, or human decency alive for mankind. Such interpretations all present values which were once considered essential for humanity but are conspicuously absent in the post-apocalyptic world. Yet these interpretations often read into the boy the same divinity that the man believes his

son has. Rather than symbolising the last spark of humanity that remains in the world, I argue that the mantra of carrying the fire is invoked by the man and boy in order to imbue their existence with meaning and motivate themselves to go on. This mantra is most often reiterated after traumatic encounters with cannibals or prolonged periods of starvation, at moments when the temptation to give up is strongest. By reminding themselves that they are burdened with a specific purpose, they stave off the temptation to give up for a while longer.

This temptation of giving up and succumbing to death is one which the man and boy constantly battle against, a threat that is just as dangerous and omnipresent as the harsh elements and cannibals. The man regards his memories of the past world as the ultimate threat to his motivation to persist with the quest. Represented in the novel through flashbacks and dreams, he views them as dangerous and addictive. While they provide both the reader and the man with a break from the never-ending bleakness of the wasteland the world has become, the dreams of 'softly coloured worlds of human love, the songs of birds, the sun' do not present the man with a welcome respite from reality (292). Rather he views them primarily as an intoxicating distraction and a threat to the man's motivation he can ill-afford. He states that he 'mistrusted all of that. He said that the right dreams for a man in peril were dreams of peril and all else was the call of languor and of death' (15). Furthermore, he warns his son to be wary of good dreams of impossible worlds in an attempt to dissuade him from this temptation, stating that 'When your dreams are of some world that never was or of some world that will never be and you are happy again then you will have given up. ... And you cant [sic] give up. I wont [sic] let you' (202). Protecting his son from dreams of the past and the deterioration of his motivation they present becomes another threat the father must contend with. Yet the boy, who has never known any world other than the one he finds himself in, does not suffer from memories of the past as the father does. Rather than being woken from good dreams he awakes from nightmares 'always about something bad happening' (288). Unlike his father, the boy only faces the immediate threats of the present world. The dreams and memories of the past can only affect him in relation to his father, only becoming dangerous if the man decides to seek refuge in the world of the past rather than struggle through that of the present.

### 2.3 Encounters on the road

In this section, I identify two kinds of encounters that the man and boy experience in their quest, those with the cannibals and people they refuse to help which challenge their perception of themselves, and those with a character named Ely and the man's late wife which challenge his belief in the quest. The gangs of cannibals that roam the country in search of prey are the most blatant example of pure and unambiguous evil McCarthy's novel depicts, partaking in acts of horrifying brutality, including roasting an infant on a spit and storing prisoners in a larder-like cellar to be consumed gradually. A close encounter with such a gang describes them as being followed by

wagons drawn by slaves in harness and piled with goods of war and after that the women, perhaps a dozen in number, some of them pregnant, and lastly a supplementary consort of catamites illclothed [sic] against the cold and fitted in dogcollars [sic] and yoked each to each. (96)

This description of a gang on the move presents the largest grouping of people the man and boy encounter in the text, suggesting that a significant number of the earth's last remaining inhabitants roam the country enslaving, murdering, and raping. The figure of the cannibal presents an image of unambiguous and barbarous evil within the narrative, reflecting the position of anthropophagy as a universal taboo among most societies as well as the label of cannibal as connoting inhumanity and savagery. In *The Man-Eating Myth*, social anthropologist William Arens influentially and controversially argued for the lack of 'adequate documentation of cannibalism as a custom in any form for any society. Rumors, suspicions, fears and accusations abound, but no satisfactory first hand account' (21). While this landmark text would spark much debate about the veracity of its claims, it undoubtably showed the power of the label of cannibal in constructing a narrative demonising inhuman and uncivilised 'others'.<sup>33</sup> The situation in *The Road* does not entirely align with that set out in Aren's account, as pointed out by Andrew Keller Estes, 'McCarthy's cannibalism is not something projected by the dominant culture onto the Other. It is not an intellectual tool used to emancipate the postcolonial subject. It is

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<sup>33</sup> See also Barker et al., *Cannibalism and the Colonial World* (1998), Laurence Goldman's *The Anthropology of Cannibalism* (1999), and Cătălin Avramescu's *An Intellectual History of Cannibalism* (2011).

real and indisputable; it is the true nature of nature' ("Cannibalism and Other Transgressions" 6). Estes further notes how 'the claim that the man and boy are the good guys can be judged by readers to be highly subjective beyond the one crucial fact of not committing cannibalism' ("Cannibalism and Other Transgressions" 5).<sup>34</sup> As they encounter more people on their journey, the boy increasingly suspects 'that the father's ordering of the world is not based on universal moral principles but entirely on his own limited perspective and self-interest' ("Cannibalism and Other Transgressions" 18). While I agree with Estes on cannibalism not being the only line of demarcation between good and evil in the text, I argue that this approach downplays the importance that storytelling has on their perception of themselves as the 'good guys' and the need for the cannibals to function as a symbol of blatant and unambiguous evil in constructing that narrative.

As they make their way across the country, the man repeatedly engages in the act of storytelling with his son: 'they sat warm in their refuge while he told the boy stories. Old stories of courage and justice as he remembered them until the boy was asleep' (42). These stories don't only serve as a form of comfort for the boy, the father is attempting to pass on the sense of morality he developed in the pre-apocalyptic world and encouraging his son to view their lives in terms of a struggle between good and evil, between the 'good guys' and the 'bad guys'. The man attempts to impose a sense of narrative structure on 'real life', stating 'A lot of bad things have happened but we're still here' (287); 'I think it's pretty good. It's a pretty good story. It counts for something' (288). He encourages his son to see the happenings of everyday existence in terms of a larger narrative, in order to give meaning to their lives beyond mere survival by stories that are based on larger cultural narratives from the past world. Cooper emphasises the importance of storytelling in the novel, arguing that in the world they inhabit, 'the act of storytelling becomes an act of heroism, and the stories themselves become the sacraments and rites of a new religious order haunted by despair but hallowed by hope' (*No More Heroes* 133). 'The father', she elaborates, 'tells stories that transmit hero identity to the boy, defining goodness and heroism in ways that seem

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<sup>34</sup> Further discussion on morality in *The Road* include Russell M. Hillier's *Morality in Cormac McCarthy's Fiction: Souls at Hazard* (2017).

irrelevant and hopelessly outdated in this ash-covered world' (*No More Heroes* 154). He also, I argue, defines badness and villainy concurrently through the incorporation of the cannibals they encounter into their narrative as the bad guys. Essential to their perception of themselves as the good guys in their narrative is the strict moral code they define and attempt to stick to. This moral code often centres around being good towards others – helping them whenever possible and not stealing from them. The most important and unbreakable rule, however, is not eating people. With the last remains of civilization disintegrating, this code provides a seemingly simple sense of morality which they can cling to. In adhering to the code, the man and boy can formulate a narrative in which they are the good guys, palpably distinguishable from the bad guys encountered on the road.

Yet even as they cling to this Manichean sense of good and evil, McCarthy increasingly shows it to be impossible to adhere to in the post-apocalyptic environment. The notion of helping others, for example, must more often than not be rejected in order to ensure their own safety and survival. The earliest example of such a situation occurs towards the beginning of the narrative, when they encounter a man who has been struck by lightning and is clearly in need of help. While the boy's first instinct is to come to his aid his father prevents him from doing so, arguing, 'We have no way to help him. I'm sorry for what happened to him but we cant fix it' (50). Later he tells his son, 'He's going to die. We cant [sic] share what we have or we'll die too' (52). Their inability to help others in who are in desperate need reoccurs later in the narrative, when the man and boy discover the prisoners trapped in the cellar but must flee before the cannibals find and trap them too. The boy's articulation of the reasons for their failure to help is reminiscent of the man's earlier explanation:

'They're going to eat them, arent they?

Yes.

And we couldnt help them because then they'd eat us too.

Yes.

And that's why we couldnt help them.

Yes.

Okay' (134-5).

They partake in a constant struggle between trying to do the right thing and the reality of the situation. Whereas the man and boy have declared themselves to be the good guys through the act of helping others, they repeatedly encounter situations in which to do so would put them in danger. The code of behaviour that has been developed is one borne out of the sense of morality developed in the pre-apocalyptic world, a narrative increasingly harder to cling to.

The encounters on the road increasingly attune the boy to the problematic aspects of these stories. Referring to a long-gone world, they are no longer relevant to the daily existence of the characters, to their 'real life'. In his eyes these stories are 'not true' because the morals they teach are no longer applicable in post-apocalyptic world:

'Those stories are not true.

They don't have to be true. They're stories.

Yes. But in the stories we're always helping people and we don't help people'  
(286-7).

While understanding the reality of their situation, the boy still clings to their code despite their multiple transgressions against it. However, the man will always put their own survival first and foremost. Their encounter with a thief towards the end of the novel displays the man's most blatant disregarding of this code. When they discover that their cart and all their provisions have been stolen, the man tracks down the thief and forces him at gunpoint to remove all of his clothes. In response to the boy's pleas the man affirms that he is going to leave the thief exactly as he left them, indirectly killing by stealing all they own and rendering them defenceless against the elements. This act of retribution represents the only time they directly cause another person's death. While the man affirms that his actions are acts of justice, the boy recognises them as revenge. This is the man's most blatant transgression against the code of morality they attempt to follow, evolving from not helping others due to necessity to directly harming a fellow man. The man's decision to adopt an eye for an eye morality is a development from the good and bad guy distinction he repeatedly makes. The man and boy set the most absolute dividing line in the dichotomous depiction of morality in the novel in their assurances that they would never resort to cannibalism, 'no matter what':

'We wouldnt ever eat anybody, would we?

No, of course not.  
 Even if we were starving?  
 ... No. No matter what.  
 Because we're the good guys.  
 Yes' (136).

This sets the clearest demarcation between good and evil found in the text. The reality of their existence makes it intensely difficult and often impossible to live up to the standards of morality they set for themselves. To help those in need would endanger their survival, and despite their promise not to steal from others they are required to do so. However, the rejection of cannibalism even as a last resort remains the one line the man and boy won't cross, allowing them to maintain their place as the good guys in their story.

Ely, an old man whose existence is seemingly more pitiful than the man and boy's, emerges as a 'small figure distant on the road, bent and shuffling' (171). This encounter challenges the divinity and sense of destiny that the man attributes to both his quest and his son. Ely is the only character in the text who is both given a name by the author and gives his name to the characters, albeit one which he admits to being fake. As Erik Wielenberg points out, Ely is highly reminiscent of the biblical figure of Elijah, yet rather than being a prophet for God has become a prophet for godlessness (1-2). Cooper similarly describes him as a 'wandering anti-prophet' afflicted with a lack of faith (223). The primary difference between them, however, is while the wife opts out of their hopeless existence, as I discuss below, Ely notes its hopelessness and persists with survival regardless. He provides cryptic and nihilistic answers to the questions the man has been pondering since the apocalyptic moment, condensing the crisis that haunts the handful of humans which still remain in the world, '[n]obody wants to be there and nobody wants to leave' (180). Both the man and Ely look ahead to humanity's last moments, with Ely concluding the impossibility of knowing if one was the last man left on earth, 'You'd just be it' (180). When the man argues that God would know it, Ely definitively states that 'There is no God and we are his prophets' (181). Rather than affirming and assigning worth to the quest, Ely negates its entire significance. He furthermore refutes the man's belief in the divine destiny of his quest, challenging the



notion of the man and boy as a divine protector and a god. Ely can see in the boy no evidence of divinity. 'Things', Ely argues, 'will be better when everybody's gone' (183). When the man asks who it will be better for, he simply responds, 'Everybody ... We'll all be better off. We'll breathe easier' (183). 'When we're all gone at last then there will be nobody here but death and his days will be numbered too', he continues, 'He'll be out in the road there with nothing to do and nobody to do it to. He'll say: Where did everybody go? And that's how it will be. What's wrong with that?' (184). He may be significant in that the boy is likely one of the last few remaining children on the planet, yet Ely denies the possibility of the boy granting humankind any sort of redemption, thereby challenging the divine purpose the man has taken upon himself.

In an earlier section, I discussed how remembering the past through dreams and daydreams functioned as a detriment to the man's motivation by tempting him to give up. His late wife's appearance in these images functions as the epitome of this temptation, compounded by her having given up on survival and committed suicide before the events in the novel. Many of McCarthy's critics have commented on his treatment of female characters.<sup>35</sup> Cant states that 'feminist critics point out the absence of significant female characters in McCarthy's texts and draw attention to the unhappy fate of most of those who do appear. That this is so cannot be denied' (16). Susan Kollin notes that the absence of women 'runs throughout McCarthy's Westerns as well as his southern novels' with the 'lack of fully developed female characters in his Westerns in some ways [making] McCarthy well-suited to the genre's broader concerns, namely its obsession with Anglo-American masculinity' (569). Nell Sullivan says of the Border Trilogy that it 'ultimately excludes the potentially significant female characters as part of a process of the obviation of women' ('Boys will be Boys' 229). Ann Fisher-Wirth and Cooper are not as critical in their condemnation, with the former stating that 'McCarthy's female characters become more interesting the less he attempts to develop them, for their power is poetic, gestural' (127). Cooper does refer to 'McCarthy's misogynistic silencing of women', noting the lack of female characters in his novels and

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<sup>35</sup> McCarthy responded to such criticism during a 2007 interview with Oprah Winfrey by stating "Women are tough...I don't pretend to understand women. I think men don't know much about women; they find them very mysterious."

that ‘the women who do appear are often either corpses or on their way to becoming corpses’, but also qualifies this statement by pointing out that ‘men are just as likely to be objectified, turned into corpses, or more explicitly dehumanized by being described exclusively in bestial terms’ (*No More Heroes* 17). The man’s wife in *The Road* follows in this tradition, she is silenced and underdeveloped, having been long-dead before the start of the novel, and her decision to commit suicide and abandon her son is heavily contrasted by the man’s love and unselfish dedication.<sup>36</sup>

She is now only encountered by the man in his dreams and memories, in which she comes to epitomise his constant temptation to give up on his quest and succumb to death. The symbol of the woman as temptress is a long-established tradition of the quest narrative, indeed, Campbell cites this overcoming of this feminised temptation as one of the stages in his hero’s journey representing material and physical temptation (101). While this can be dismissed as a product of Campbell’s time, it is significant how enduring this symbol is, as its prominent use in this novel attests to. McCarthy presents the character of the mother primarily as a temptation that would lead the man astray and cause him to abandon his quest. Sullivan identifies ‘a theme echoing throughout most of McCarthy’s fiction: the theme of female sexuality inextricable bound up with death and, therefore, posed as a source of masculine dread’, an association which ‘leads inexorably to the narrative death sentence for young women in the McCarthy canon’ (68). In keeping with this theme of the female temptress, the man’s recollections of his wife present a dangerously seductive figure. She is described as a ‘pale bride’ emerging from ‘a green and leafy canopy. Her nipples pipeclayed and her rib bones painted white. She wore a dress of gauze and her dark hair was carried up in combs of ivory, combs of shell. Her smile, her downturned eyes’ (17). The colour of the figure depicted is overwhelmingly white, invoking the image of a wedding night with a ‘pale bride’ wearing a white dress and an ivory comb. She is presented as an enticing and alluring, with McCarthy drawing attention to her breasts, her smile and downturned eyes. Yet she is also devoid of life, being a pale figure with visible rib bones, wearing a wedding dress made from gauze bandages. During her last conversation with the man before her

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<sup>36</sup> On the mother in the film adaptation see Peebles’ *Cormac McCarthy and Performance: Page, Stage, Screen* (2017).

suicide, this intertwining of sexual temptation and death is made more overt. She sardonically identifies death as her new lover, uncaring if her husband thinks of her a 'faithless slut' (58). Death can now provide for her in a way that her husband is no longer capable of doing, able to satisfy her only hope, that for 'eternal nothingness', and she achieved this by committing suicide (59). The scholarly perception of the wife is extremely critical, and I argue this judgement represents the same misogyny as McCarthy's representation does. Randall Wilhelm cites her reasons for resorting to suicide as 'untenable, even immoral in the face of human suffering', describing her as embodying 'the human mentality that succumbs to fear and doubt and deprivation because it cannot think beyond the limited scope of the self, one that too readily relinquishes the duty of life' (135). Cooper describes her as 'an embodiment of the egocentrism and faithlessness that are swiftly killing the planet' with her 'abject lack of pity for or emotional connection to her child [suggesting] that she has been poisoned by the internal and external death of her world' (223). She is suffering from a 'catastrophic loss of faith in human endeavour', the same loss, argues Cooper, of 'mental and emotional commitment to others' which in the novel 'results in dissociative behaviour ranging from the mother's rejection of her son to people devouring their own infants' (223). This is one of the stronger condemnations of the mother, aligning her with the murderous gangs and cannibals encountered in the novel, positing that emotional disconnection from one's child is comparable to consuming a child. As Berit Åström argues, 'the narrative demonstrates that the mother is ultimately irrelevant for the emotional and psychical survival of the man and the boy, the scholars', however, 'vilify her for shirking her responsibility', dismissing her 'with a surprising amount of vitriol' (124-5). While McCarthy's presentation the novel's only female character in the novel as silenced, underdeveloped, and symbolic of deadly temptation is undoubtedly misogynistic, such interpretations of the character do not only function to reinforce this misogyny but actively contribute to it.

In contrast to the pervasive perception of the character, I argue that her decision to commit suicide is not one solely brought about by weakness or selfishness but rather by a realistic and unflinching assessment of the situation they are in. The man is constantly fearing that he is simply delaying the inevitable, possibly missing the

opportunity to grant his son a quick and painless death. During a conversation with her husband recalled in flashback the mother states, '[t]he one thing I can tell you is that you won't survive for yourself' (59). She would have her son join her in death if not for the man, in order to protect him from the brutal death she envisions is their future. 'Sooner or later, they will catch us and they will kill us', she tells him, 'They will rape me. They will rape him. They are going to rape us and kill us and eat us and you won't face it. You'd rather wait for it to happen. But I cant. I cant' (58). This brief conversation casts doubt on the legitimacy of their entire quest, challenging the assumption that their continued striving for survival is the only option, which is further reinforced by the man's inability to form a convincing rebuttal to her arguments. He ultimately realizes that no matter how bad the situation he would never be able to take his son's life: 'I can't hold my son dead in my arms. I thought I could but I can't' (298). The repetition of the word 'can't' in both their proclamations distinguishes the two parents based on whether or not they are able to take this final action. The mother's wish to have her son follow her in death is one ultimately borne from wanting to spare him a worse end. Her realistic understanding of the situation enables her to take the decisive action the man cannot, identifying the futility in continuing to force survival as delaying the inevitable. She chooses to take her own life, in light of no convincing argument against the choice, no hope that their lives will improve. It is this ultimate decision that I argue sets her apart from the archetypal temptresses and their sole dedication to thwarting the hero's journey. She becomes an active agent in deciding her own fate, her actions borne from a realistic evaluation of their options. This grants her an agency that surpasses the limitations of the archetype, all the while presenting a significant challenge to the legitimacy of their entire quest. The people they encounter on their journey therefore function as far more than aids or obstacles to the quest. Rather, the various ways they react to the post-apocalyptic existence present alternatives to the quest that question the man and boy's perception of the quest as well as their perception of their own morality.

## **2.4 Pre and post-apocalyptic America as a space of failure**

The post-apocalyptic landscape depicted in the novel presents an image of America which has become dangerous and unsustainable for human beings, bereft of

life as well as the ability to create it. The sea has been reduced to a grey sludge and the sky is constantly clouded with grey ash, blocking out the sun as a source of warmth and light. There are no signs of growing vegetation but simply ‘old crops dead and flattened’, ‘everything dead to the root’, nor do they encounter any living animals (20). The only living things that remain are a small number of humans, most of whom have resorted to cannibalism with the rest left to forage for the last few provisions left on the planet. As they travel through the wasteland, the man and boy are constantly confronted with more images of the devastation left behind: ‘Charred and limbless trunks of trees stretching away on every side. Ash moving over the road and the sagging hands of blind wire strung from the blackened light poles whining thinly in the wind’ (6). Yet despite the vivid descriptions of what remains of the world, McCarthy is intentionally vague about the cause of the devastation, providing only sparse information. In an interview, McCarthy states that ‘I don’t have an opinion ... it could be anything – volcanic activity or it could be nuclear war. It is not really important’ (‘Hollywood’s Favorite Cowboy’).<sup>37</sup> The novel’s reference to the actual event through the man’s memory does not dwell on it for long:

The clocks stopped at 1:17. A long shear of light and then a series of low concussions. He got up and went to the window. What is it? she said. He didn’t [sic] answer. He went into the bathroom and threw the lightswitch [sic] but the power was already gone. A dull rose glow in the windowglass [sic]. He dropped to one knee and raised the level to stop the tub and then turned on both taps as far as they would go. She was standing in the doorway in her nightwear, clutching the jamb, cradling her belly in one hand. What is it? she said. What is happening?

I dont [sic] know.

Why are you taking a bath?

I’m not. (54)

McCarthy only mentions a few ambiguous effects of the cataclysm, the power going out, a bright light, strange sounds, and a dull glow. The remainder of the memory focuses on the man and his wife’s immediate reaction, the fact that she was pregnant

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<sup>37</sup> See also McCarthy’s interview with David Kushner (2007).

with the boy when it occurred, his filling of the bathtub and the short conversation they have.

McCarthy's rendering of the cause of the cataclysm intentionally vague has led to conjecture about its nature, with critics pointing out its ambiguous nature as well as a variety of possible causes. Josephs questions why, if 'the unspecified catastrophe in the novel is man-made ... does McCarthy deliberately fail to say so', positing that it may be 'God-made or, perhaps worse, a catastrophic accident' (135). Julian Murphet and Mark Steven mention that the possibility of 'a nuclear holocaust, ... would imply that the disaster was of human origin and possibly even the result of a conflict of civilisations and religions', however, point out that 'there is no mention of radiation and at one point the father and son discover a bunker that might have been a fallout shelter but was never used by its owners' (132). They also reference 'global warming or an extra-terrestrial body that would have exploded on impact' as possible scenarios that 'are not man-made events but rather suggest nature's complete indifference to the conditions of human existence' (132). Ellis also allows the question to remain open to interpretation, citing 'nuclear winter, or the calamitous climate change sped up by a comet strike, or whatever happens to cover the book with an endless snow of ashes' ("Another Sense" 28). In exploring its causes, Dana Philips focuses on the man and his wife's immediate reaction, particularly the short exchange that occurs between them, stating that it was 'not the moment to engage in formal deliberations on the validity of all the different doomsday scenarios that have been proposed, or prophesied, down the ages', nor 'for long-winded answers to simple questions. "Why are you taking a bath?" "I'm not." Enough said' (177). Yet I argue that such readings, whether they focus on one specific cause or list various possibilities, do not consider the implications of the ambiguity of McCarthy's apocalypse. That both the text itself and interviews show McCarthy's refusal to align with any one particular reading broadens the scope of the text to a larger critique of twenty-first century American anxieties, specifically ecological, economical, and ideological.<sup>38</sup> The country the man and boy quest through is simultaneously constructed

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<sup>38</sup> Cant makes brief mention in a footnote of how the novel reflects 'the mood of fear that has permeated the Western mind in the first decade of the twenty-first century', citing how the extreme images depicted in *The Road* recall global warming, Hurricane Katrina, Abu Gharaib and Guantanamo Bay, and the attacks on the World Trade Centre (332).

from and littered with remnants of the environmental carelessness, unfettered consumerism, and ideological crisis that caused it, creating what I have termed in this thesis as a space of failure. The devastated American landscape is contrasted against the man's memories and dreams of the past, yet McCarthy avoids depicting the latter as purely idyllic. Rather through my exploration of the environmental, economic, and ideological aspects, I argue that the novel presents a space of failure in which the devastation was underway long ago.

In order to explore how McCarthy represents environmental anxiety, I will focus on how the devastation and decay that characterises this space is already evident in the man's recollections of the past. In *Cormac McCarthy and the Writing of American Spaces*, Estes argues that there are 'two distinct visions of the environment' in *The Road*.<sup>39</sup> While most of the novel represents the 'apocalyptic hellscape' as 'overwhelmingly negative', the 'pre-apocalyptic world ... is one in which a nature is endowed with entirely positive significance ... Human contact with a thriving and healthy nature is juxtaposed against this new world of grey ash where nothing grows' (189-90).<sup>40</sup> In my reading of one such image of the past, I want to contradict the idea that McCarthy presents the pre-apocalyptic world as a purely idyllic vision. Early in the narrative the man describes what he considers to be 'the perfect day of his childhood', 'the day to shape the days upon' consisting of being on a boat in a lake with his uncle (12). He describes how

The shore was lined with birchtrees [sic] that stood bone pale against the dark of the evergreens beyond. The edge of the lake a riprap of twisted stumps, gray and weathered, the windfall trees of a hurricane years past. The trees themselves had long been sawed for firewood and carried away. His uncle turned the boat and shipped the oars and they drifted over the sandy shallows until the transom grated in the sand. A dead perch lolling belly up in the clear water. (11-12)

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<sup>39</sup> Estes also extends this interpretation to *Blood Meridian*, *All the Pretty Horses*, *The Crossing*, and *No Country for Old Men*.

<sup>40</sup> For more environmental readings of McCarthy's setting see Tim Edwards' 'The End of the Road: Pastoralism and the Post-Apocalyptic Waste Land of Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*' and Laura Gruber Godfrey's "'The World He'd Lost': Geography and "Green" Memory in Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*'.

As Tim Edwards notes, McCarthy inserts ‘vaguely gothic images’ that undercut each attempt to invoke an idyllic scene of nature (58). It already shows signs of the decay and aridity that defines the setting of the novel. The trees present in this scene are described as ‘bone pale’ in colour, reduced to ‘twisted stumps’ as a result of a previous cataclysm not quite as devastating as the most recent one. Those untouched by the hurricane have been sawed and used for firewood. The only mention of another creature other than them is a fish which is conspicuously dead, ‘lolling belly up’ in the lake. Furthermore, I argue that this scene presents significant resonance by also functioning as a microcosm of the novel. Both this brief scene and the main narrative feature two relations, an older and a younger; the absence of any living creatures besides themselves and fruitless search for food; and the surrounding setting still feeling the after-effects of trauma, be it natural like the long-past hurricane, inflicted by man like the sawed-off trees, or an ambiguous, unidentified cataclysm. Far from being an entirely positive image displaying the vitality of nature, this recollection shows that the decay has already set in, positing that environmental disaster was already underway long before the cataclysm.

The second aspect of American anxiety that contributes to McCarthy’s space of failure is economical, as presented by the supermarkets the man and boy venture into in search of food. The man and boy stopping at supermarkets on their way is particularly significant, considering their position as ‘quintessential symbols of American capitalism’ (Levenstein 114).<sup>41</sup> Chester Liebs states of the modern supermarket’s origins that, ‘[w]hile the prosperous years of the late 1920s heralded the switch to combination stores, the depression era was the real watershed for food marketing. Hard times created an ideal climate of innovation’ (124). The advent of the supermarket was to act as a moral boost for ‘a public dispirited by the depression’ (124-6) ‘[T]he ability to shop at a place called “supermarket”’, he continues, ‘rather than just a plain old grocery or food store was to participate in the future, now. The very use of the word was enough to give the illusion that profound advances had taken place’ (126). Yet the future supermarkets of *The Road* have long been emptied of anything useful, with the remaining survivors looting any food and medical supplies they could find: ‘The pharmacy was looted but

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<sup>41</sup> See also Warren Belasco’s *Meals to Come* (2006) and Michael Ruhlman’s *Grocery: The Buying and Selling of Food in America* (2017).



the store itself was oddly intact. Expensive electronic equipment sat unmolested on the shelves', 'Coins everywhere in the ash' (195). These symbolic representations of technology and capital are aspects of modern life once considered indispensable yet are now rendered completely useless by the cataclysm. They now litter the abandoned stores which have been picked clean of all else, unacknowledged and untouched by those who once considered them vital. In the narrative's first foray into a supermarket any produce left behind had 'long dried to wrinkled effigies of themselves', yet the man locates a can of Coca-Cola (21).

By the door were two softdrink machines that had been tilted over into the floor and opened with a prybar ... He sat and ran his hand around in the works of the gutted machines and in the second one it closed over a cold metal cylinder. He withdrew his hand slowly and sat looking at a Coca Cola. (22)

The introduction of the can of Coke early on in the narrative functions as another intense collision between the pre- and post-apocalyptic reality. McCarthy draws attention to the product, setting it apart from other items, and even the protagonists by assigning it a name. The food cans found, the road map produced by an oil company, the advertisements, supermarkets and cars, take after the man and boy in that they are left unnamed. This is indicative of Coke's prominent symbolic position as 'the iconic American product' as McCarthy describes it in an interview ("Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy"). 'The one thing that everybody knows about America', he points out, 'the one thing above cowboys and Indians, above everything else that you can think of, is Coca-Cola. You can't go to a village of 18 people in the remotest part of Africa that they don't know about Coca-Cola' ("Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy").

Furthermore, as Brian Donnelly points out, the supermarket is also the ultimate image of corporate cannibalism, a precursor to the actual cannibalism that occurs in the text.<sup>42</sup> It 'feeds off those weaker entities of the same species and, through the monopoly of supply and demand, drives specialised, individual traders out of business' (71). The placement of the soft drink in the gutted supermarket so early in the text, renders excessive consumer culture inseparable from the consumption of human beings later in

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<sup>42</sup> See also Jordan J. Dominy's 'Cannibalism, Consumerism, and Profanation: Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* and the End of Capitalism' (2015).

the narrative. Yet these images of consumer culture as a precursor to cannibal consumption act not as Donnolly states, as ‘a warning against the possibly future that the novel portrays’ (72). Rather, like the environmental images, they posit that the future is a progression from contemporary excessive consumption. Consumerism has merely changed in the post-apocalyptic world, indicating that the precedent for cannibalism had already been set, exemplified in the consumer culture that brought about the economic and cultural dominance of supermarkets and Coke in America.

The third aspect contributing to the space of failure I discuss is the novel as a reaction to the September 11 attacks and the ideological concerns which pervaded its aftermath.<sup>43</sup> In *The Spirit of Terrorism*, Jean Baudrillard states that ‘the attacks on the World Trade Center in New York’ represent ‘the absolute event, the ‘mother’ of all events, there pure event uniting within itself all the events that have never taken place’ (3-4). Rene Girard also reinforces their being a ‘seminal event’ representing ‘a new world dimension’, but also assigns them what he refers to as the ‘apocalyptic dimension’. David Kushner describing McCarthy’s driving impulse behind *The Road*:

Soon after, in 2001, he was visiting Tennessee when the attacks of 9/11 unfolded ... McCarthy began to wonder about the future facing his boy. “It’s going to be a very troubled place.” One night, during a trip to Texas with John, McCarthy imagined such a place. While his son slept, McCarthy gazed out the window of his room and pictured flames on the hill. He later decided to write a novel about it; *The Road* is dedicated to his son. (“Cormac McCarthy’s Apocalypse”)

That the novel is influenced by the images of the attacks is evident in McCarthy’s presentation of abandoned and burning buildings highly reminiscent of those of those during the attacks, particularly in ‘the cluster of tall buildings vaguely askew’, ‘the iron armatures [that] had softened in the heat and then reset again to leave the buildings standing out of true’, and ‘[t]he melted window glass hung frozen down the walls like icing on a cake’ (291). A contributing factor to further represent this space is the ash and

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<sup>43</sup> For more general discussion of literary responses to 9/11 see Bradley And Tate’s *The New Atheist Novel: Philosophy, Fiction and Polemic after 9/11* (2010), Richard Gray’s *After the Fall: American Literature Since 9/11* (2011), and Keniston and Quinn’s *Literature after 9/11* (2013).

smoke which are now constants of the desolate landscape, which recall the toxic dust and fumes which engulfed Lower Manhattan in 2001.

Beyond the images, however, McCarthy is also concerned with what remains after the defining moment. Being published in 2006, the novel is close enough to the attacks to present a visceral reminder of the scenes witnessed. Yet in the five years until the publication McCarthy was able to go further and offer not just a depiction of the event but an exploration of the aftermath. *The Road* also functions as an analysis of the reordering of morality which often follows such a devastating event. John Murphy examines the rhetoric of President George W. Bush as developing a 'Manichaean frame' in which 'no subtlety was possible, but amplification of evil was easy' (614). This frame provided an essential lens through which the American public 'was to interpret its identity. Simply put, we were good and they were evil' (621). One can draw parallels between the father's sense of morality and the black and white morality that seemed so prevalent in the aftermath of the attack. The man and boy attempt to impose some order onto their lives by organising the world into 'good guys' and 'bad guys'. Yet, as I discussed above, this stringent and inflexible morality which is initially set up by the characters is constantly challenged by the choices they are forced to make in reaction to those they encounter on their quest. The decisions the man is forced to make in order to survive and the boy's decreasing ability to see them as the good guys complicate this simple dichotomy. Their attempt to identify themselves as the good guys and their enemies as the bad guys in the wake of a monumental apocalyptic event is not a tendency unique to the post-apocalyptic landscape. Rather, like the other aspects discussed in this section it is directly informed by a distinctly American anxiety pervasive in the wake of 9/11.

This space was also represented on screen in the 2009 film adaptation of *The Road* directed by John Hillcoat and starring Viggo Mortensen and Kodi Smit-McPhee as the man and boy respectively.<sup>44</sup> Rather than utilising computer-generated imagery (CGI) to render the landscape, Hillcoat favoured real locations: 'We were looking at man-made disasters and a combination of environmental disasters like Katrina and Mount St. Helens. It was inspiring because it was like we could see the world of the book coming

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<sup>44</sup> On film adaptations of McCarthy see Peebles (2017).

alive' ("Making of The Road"). The combination of these natural disasters with the footage of smoke from 9/11 gave the film what Mary Zournazi cites as an 'uncanny sense of the familiar' as a kind of 'realism is achieved through a cultural and visual memory' (146).<sup>45</sup> This film does reinforce the juxtaposition between idyllic past and post-apocalyptic future that I have argued McCarthy deliberately avoids. The man's memories are brightly lit and saturated with colour, presenting a stark juxtaposition with the unremitting grey palette of the post-apocalyptic landscape that constitutes the vast majority of the film's setting. However, in his choice of presenting predominately real American landscape, Hillcoat aligns with McCarthy's text in his depiction of future catastrophe as a result of present anxiety. As Arthur Redding notes, this technique confronts the audience 'with "genuine" instances of America ablaze, in rubble, drowned, washed away, up in smoke, in the midst of a fictional rendition of apocalyptic aftermath' (447). Hillcoat's adaptation depicts 'the end of the world not as spectacle, not as an event to come, not as big bang, but rather as the variegated whimpers of the quotidian, as the overvalued currency of current events' (447). 'The apocalypse', he states, 'has already happened, it is happening all about us, even as we gaze upon it, more or less unruffled' (447). I argue, however, that Hillcoat's adaptation stops short of fully presenting the extent of the space of failure created in the novel. McCarthy repeatedly emphasises how only a sparse number of humans managed to survive the apocalypse; there are no other animals shown, nor any living insects or plants in the entire novel. The film, however, includes the presence of other living creatures apart from the remaining humans, notably a beetle that the boy finds and a dog belonging to the family that takes him in at the end of the narrative. These small touches, as Peebles notes, function as visual indicators offering the 'possibility that the world itself may avoid tragedy', that the boy and his new 'family can look forward to something more than brute survival' ("Cormac McCarthy and Film" 13-14). Post-apocalyptic literature and film generally assume some form of warning against the future inherent in the space it

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<sup>45</sup> Zournazi also identifies the man and boy's appearance as contributing to this uncanny realism, stating that 'that shopping trolley that [they] cart around is a reminder of the homeless in every city. The costume and set design worked specifically to give an "aged" effect; the costumes were ill-fitted and found for the film to give a sense of the homeless characters as well as "homeless" wanderers in this hostile landscape' (146).

presents, functioning as a provocation to take action before it is too late by showing the extreme consequences of contemporary anxieties. Yet as I have explored, McCarthy subverts this expectation, instead using aspects of the present to depict an unavoidable future. The space he creates does not simply confront the reader with unfamiliar violence and brutality. In fact, this space of failure is both constructed from and littered with remnants of the present environmental carelessness, unfettered consumerism, and ideological crisis that created it. In doing so, I argue that *The Road* presents a vision of America's future which functions not as a mere warning against a possible future, but rather posits that this future is already imminent.

## 2.5 The failure of their quest

In this section I discuss the scenes at the end of the novel that indicate the failure of the quest and its implications for the future of humanity and the world of McCarthy's vision. Firstly, the last two attempts at locating a safe haven that the novel depicts with their reaching the sea and the disappointing reality of it, and subsequently, the boy's encounter with a character termed the Veteran after his father's death. Secondly, the final paragraph of the novel which presents an image of 'brook trout' that serves as an elegy for the world that is no more. McCarthy depicts the post-apocalyptic world as one which is dark, grey, and cold, emphasising this in its first description: 'the dark and the cold of the night ... Nights dark beyond darkness and the days more gray each one than what had gone before. Like the onset of some cold glaucoma dimming away the world' (1). Establishing the sea as their destination, as the goal of their quest, the man and boy imagine it to be the opposite of the post-apocalyptic landscape: bright, blue, and warm. The man pins all their hope on reaching the sea, we're still going south ... So we'll be warm', 'everything depended on reaching the coast' (9, 29). Despite the descriptions of various lakes and ponds that they encounter exhibiting the same greyness and lifelessness that inhabits the rest of the world, they nevertheless hold on to the bright, blue, warm sea of their imagining. It is therefore the ultimate disappointment to find that the sea is not as they imagined it,

Out there was the gray beach with the slow combers rolling dull and leaden and the distant sound of it. Like the desolation of some alien sea breaking on the

shores of a world unheard of. Out on the tidal flats lay a tanker half careened. Beyond that the ocean vast and cold and shifting heavily like a slowly heaving vat of slag and then the gray squall line of ash. He looked at the boy. He could see the disappointment in his face. I'm sorry it's not blue, he said'. (230)

The sea they find is 'bereft of light, water's characteristic of capturing and reflecting light deadened in the absence of any unshrouded light source' (Luce 70). It signals not only the failure of their quest to find somewhere that has not been afflicted with the dark and cold, it brings with it the realisation of the impossibility of any attempts to locate a safe home. There is, McCarthy emphasises with this scene, no place left in his post-apocalyptic vision that remains bright and warm. This depiction of the sea, I argue, undermine any hope that the boy being taken in by the Veteran signals the possible continuation of humanity. The man's illness is constantly worsening, signally that the boy will soon be left to fend for himself. However, after his father's death the boy is approached by another man referred to as the Veteran, who extends the boy an invitation to join his family. Despite the boy's initial suspicions, he is convinced that they are the 'good guys' and are 'carrying the fire' in part due to assurances that this new family includes other children (303). The boy's acceptance into another family following the death of his father could be interpreted as providing an optimistic outlook not only for the boy but for the fate of the land in general. Indeed, in the film adaptation it is not simply the Veteran who appears after the man has passed but accompanying him is the rest of his family. They even have someone managed to keep a seemingly healthy dog as a pet, despite the utter scarcity of food. Yet McCarthy repeatedly shows that every seemingly safe haven the characters find is only temporary. Taking into account that the only source of sustenance is a limited food supply, as no animals or living plants are found throughout the novel, this presents a bleak outlook for the boy, and indeed the future of humanity.

Following the boy's encounter with the Veteran, McCarthy ends the novel with the following paragraph presenting an image of what has been lost from the world:

Once there were brook trout in the streams in the mountains. You could see them standing in the amber current where the white edges of their fins wimpled softly in the flow. They smelled of moss in your hand. Polished and muscular and

torsional. On their backs were vermiculate patterns that were maps of the world in its becoming. Maps and mazes. Of a thing which could not be put back. Not made right again. In the deep glens where they lived all things were older than man and they hummed of mystery. (306-7)

Given that this paragraph not only presents a striking contrast to the constant desolation that comprises most of the novel but also ends the novel on an ambiguous note, it has naturally drawn various interpretations. Cant describes it as expressing ‘what we all know [that] ... mystery hums in the ardent heart but not forever’, that one day there will be a long end in which all things will pass ‘and the pattern of movement that was set in being aeons ago will one day cease and days will be no more since there will be no-one to measure their passing’ (280). Spurgeon points out that McCarthy ‘closes out his text with a lyrical paragraph that seems likely to strike his readers as more hopeful than it actually is’ (186). Indeed, Estes views the ‘maps etched into the backs of living fish ... as a suggestion of a new way forward, a better way of interacting with the environment’ (190). Yet, I argue, that this final paragraph is not merely mourning the destruction of the world. The description of the ‘world in its becoming’ as something ‘which could not be put back’ or ‘made right again’ carries with it the implication of blame, the inability or unwillingness to right something that has been wronged. The devastation and violence that characterise the world he imagines is too bleak to be inspired by the inevitable passing of time, the scale of the devastation and the horror of the world too brutal. This final paragraph does not only mourn the loss of the ‘things older than man’, it expresses anger at their loss. At the beginning of this chapter I questioned whether *The Road* could function as an effective warning that inspires political action or whether the scope of the failure was so extensive as to provoke nihilism and apathy. Here I argue that McCarthy strikes a balance between these two points. The vision of the future he depicts is inevitable, he posits, thus negating any attempt at preventing its outcome. Yet in representing a post-apocalyptic world that is fundamentally informed – as well as brought about – by American concerns, he also expresses anger at this inevitability.

However, this is not to say that McCarthy depicts a world completely void of hope or redemption. Yet, I argue that in his novel he does not locate it in the future of humanity but rather in the relationship between his two protagonists. As I stated in the

previous chapter, the unremitting sense of failure often functions to throw into sharper relief moments of love and human connection. The brutal and meaningless world only serves to emphasise the loving and tender relationship between the man and boy. In doing so, McCarthy maintains his critique of American Exceptionalism, still presenting an unrelentingly bleak view of a future in which current American failures are brutally realised. The few remaining humans are not the survivors who will re-establish the human race, nor is the boy the messianic figure that will cure humanity and the world of their ills. The world they inhabit is dead, or dying, and they will die with it. Yet, the relationship between the man and boy is undoubtably the most tender McCarthy has depicted, and the film adaptation serves to emphasise the love they bear for each other. It shows that even beyond the dichotomy of success and failure, even in a landscape like *The Road's*, there remains the potential for love and self-sacrifice. The love they share is not predicated on the man protecting the boy as to ensure the future survival of the human race or the continuation of civilisation. It is unconcerned with the potential success of humanity, and therefore all the more valuable due to the unremitting failure that surrounds them, both in terms of the space of failure they are questing in and the ultimate failure of their quest.

While inherent to the genre of post-apocalyptic fiction is the destruction of the entire world, I argue McCarthy's depicts America as being particularly culpable, partly due to its prominence on the world stage as the only current global superpower. The mentality of exceptionalism that has become one of the most defining ways through which U.S. citizens and governments comprehend themselves is not merely a harmless fantasy but a dangerous delusion. In this chapter, I have argued that *The Road* critiques this exceptionalism by creating a devastated space of failure that embodies contemporary American anxieties which I have identified as environmental disaster, unfettered consumerism, and ideological crisis. This space, furthermore, depicts a vision of the future in which not only is the end of the world unavoidable but also laments the futility of human endeavour, which renders the novel's use of the quest narrative all the more significant. The man and boy's quest towards the coast for a safe home, one which they define as bright, warm, and alive, is a failure as there is nowhere left in the post-apocalyptic landscape that still remains so. Through the novel, McCarthy posits that it is



not in the future of humanity that the reader can locate hope and redemption but rather in the loving relation between a father and son.

### 3. Michael Ondaatje's *Anil's Ghost*

'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights' currently holds the Guinness World Record for the most translated document in the world. After achieving the award in 1999 for having collected, translated, and disseminated the document into 298 languages and dialects, the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) released a statement declaring that "'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights" is the most universal document in the world' ('World Record'). 2016 saw the milestone of 500 languages passed and a reiteration of the document's universality by the OHCHR: 'The growing number of translations underscores the universality of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the power of its words to resonate strongly across all cultures and languages' ('New Record'). The rhetoric of universality is inherent in establishing of a global doctrine of human rights. This can be no more evident than in the foundational document of contemporary human rights discourse, 'The Universal Declaration of Human Rights'. Presented at the United Nations General Assembly in Paris in 1948, the Declaration is one of the essential, most influential documents of the twentieth century. In its preamble it purports to be

a common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping this Declaration constantly in mind, shall strive by teaching and education to promote respect for these rights and freedoms and by progressive measures, national and international, to secure their universal and effective recognition and observance, both among the peoples of Member States themselves and among the peoples of territories under their jurisdiction. (*Universal Declaration*)

Yet this very universality, particularly in terms of its indiscriminate application to non-Western countries, has been the subject of much debate on human rights for decades. Michael Ondaatje enters this discourse with *Anil's Ghost*, a novel published in 2000 and set in Sri Lanka during its civil war. The novel is ostensibly set up as a forensic detective quest yet utilises this form to engage with questions of how to reconcile with human rights abuses during the long and bloody conflict that was still ongoing at the time of publication. The narrative centres around Anil Tissera, a native Sri Lankan who

has lived abroad for the past fifteen years. She is sent back to Sri Lanka on behalf of the United Nations, who she now works for as a forensic scientist, in order to investigate government-sponsored human rights abuses. She is paired up with local archaeologist Sarath Diyanesa and together they discover the skeleton of a recently murdered man, hidden in an archaeological preserve only accessible to government officials. They deduce that this skeleton, who they nickname Sailor, was the victim of a state-sponsored murder committed some five years ago. Sarath and Anil attempt to identify him, with Anil believing that by discovering the truth about his murder she can achieve justice for Sailor, as well as for the other unidentified victims of the Sri Lankan civil war. Yet this quest for truth and justice is ultimately revealed to be doomed to failure. Not only does Anil fail in her attempt to hold the government accountable for Sailor's death, but her efforts also result in further bloodshed as Sarath is murdered for his role in guaranteeing that Anil is able to leave Sri Lanka safely.

In this chapter I will begin by contextualising Ondaatje's text as a human rights novel set in Sri Lanka in the midst of its civil war which depicts a forensic detective quest, particularly focusing on the implications Ondaatje's use of the field of forensic science has for the novel's treatment of human rights. I will next explore Anil's function as the novel's quester by identifying as both a forensic scientist as well as a displaced Sri Lankan national. In this section, I argue that she is primarily characterised by 'distance', whether it be the distance she maintains from others through self-isolation, or the distance from Sri Lanka she has created as a result of her long absence. I will then focus on Anil's motivation to undertake the quest, discussing the implications of her obsession with names and naming for her career as a forensic scientist in which she is primarily tasked with identifying unknown victims of human rights violations. In the next section, I focus on her encounters with other characters during her quest, Sri Lankans who are also distanced, but unlike Anil, having been caught in the midst of a long and violent conflict are distanced by their trauma and feelings of guilt. I will then focus on how Ondaatje depicts the questing landscape as a space of failure, primarily focusing on how the characters repeatedly engage in debates as to how to best represent the truth of this space. The final section will look at how Anil's failure in her quest was repeatedly foreshadowed in the novel, further emphasising the inadequacy of Western

universalising frameworks as applied indiscriminately in other countries. It will also argue that through this failure, Ondaatje creates space for the addressing of trauma not through the perpetuation of cycles of violence but rather through human connection and community. Ultimately, this chapter argues that Ondaatje represents the inadequacy of universalising notions of truth and justice in the face of human rights violation in Sri Lanka and presents the failure of the quest as signalling the need for an alternative method of addressing its trauma, one rooted in community and reconciliation rather than retributive justice.

The Sri Lankan civil war was the zenith of a decades long conflict between the majority Sinhala and minority Tamil population of the island, with the active phase of the civil war beginning in 1983 when the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (or the LTTE) rose up against the government with the aim of creating an independent Tamil state.<sup>46</sup> The ensuing conflict was bitter and bloody, with an estimated death count of 100,000. After a long quarter century of civil war, the Sri Lankan government declared a definitive victory over the LTTE in 2009. The following day, the Sri Lankan president Mahinda Rajapaksa gave a speech in parliament in which he marked the end of the conflict and the victory of the government's counterinsurgency campaign. 'When the terrorists were calling for war', he declared, 'we responded with a humanitarian operation. Our troops went to this operation carrying a gun in one hand, the Human Rights Charter in the other, hostages on their shoulders, and the love of their children in their hearts' ('The victory'). This speech, as Neil DeVotta notes, deliberately obfuscates that the government's scorched earth counterterrorism campaign was far from humanitarian, the consequences of which 'are now playing out, with a new government claiming to pursue reconciliation and accountability with the Tamil minority even as it fends off allegations of war crimes from the international community' (74). *Anil's Ghost* opens with an Author's Note in which Ondaatje contextualises his novel within this crisis, which he describes as involving 'three essential groups: the government, the antigovernment insurgents in the south and the separatist guerrillas in the north' (vii).

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<sup>46</sup> See E. Valentine Daniel's *Charred Lullabies: Chapters in an Anthropography of Violence* (1996), William Clarence's *Ethnic Warfare in Sri Lanka and the UN Crisis* (2007), Ahmed Hashim's *When Counterinsurgency Wins: Sri Lanka's Defeat of the Tamil Tigers* (2013), Mark Salter's *To End a Civil War: Norway's Peace Engagement in Sri Lanka* (2015).

After ‘the insurgents and the separatists had declared war on the government’, ‘legal and illegal government squads were known to have been sent out to hunt down the separatists and the insurgents’ in response (vii). ‘Today’, he concludes this note, writing in 2000, ‘the war in Sri Lanka continues in a different form’ (vii). This note is reflective of a tendency Ondaatje adheres to in the novel, that of refusing to refer to Sinhala and Tamil beyond their identification as Sri Lankan languages. In his ‘rejection of ethnonationalist claims of predetermine group filiation based on mythicized primordial cultural coherence and distinction’, Joseph Slaughter argues, Ondaatje creates a novel which is ‘profoundly antinationalist ... dismissing the essentialist terms typically used by both domestic and international media to simplify the brutal civil struggle over the shape and machinery of the Sri Lankan state as merely an ethnic conflict’ (195). For Ondaatje, the politics and action of the conflict are only every present in the margin of his novel, rather he engages with the effect that it is having on his characters and the population at large. His major concern, and by extension that of this chapter, is the trauma inflicted on the Sri Lankan populace, and the possibility of discovering the truth of and achieving justice for the human rights abuses that occurred during the long and bloody conflict.<sup>47</sup>

In *Human Rights and the World*, A. H. Robertson and J. G. Merrills describe how the human rights discourse surrounding universality is concerned with both ‘the source of our ideas about human rights’ as well as ‘the practical problem of their current relevance’ (8). They note that ‘the philosophical foundations of the concept of human rights’ can locate its origins ‘in the liberal democratic tradition of Western Europe – a tradition which is itself the product of Greek philosophy, Roman law, the Judaeo-Christian tradition, the humanism of the Reformation and the Age of Reason’ (2). Furthermore, the rights defined by the Universal Declaration and regarded as ‘important in the developed countries of the West reflect values which are alien to the cultures of Africa and Asia, or, if their value is admitted, that they are luxuries which the people of

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<sup>47</sup> Ondaatje stated of this concern, ‘You have someone who is a part of the country, and in a way, has to betray it. It’s an odd state to be in, blowing the whistle on your home country. What exactly is the morality? What is your responsibility to the place you come from? Obviously, that is something that concerns me. I wasn’t sure how to write that story, how to write about the war in Sri Lanka. I decided to write from the point of view of people who are not involved in the politics, not involved actively in the war’ (“Cubist Civil War”).

those continents cannot afford' (9). In *Human Rights Inc.*, Slaughter discusses how, with specific reference to the narrative form of the *Bildungsroman*, such discourses on human rights issues are represented in the novel. Slaughter explores how literature and the law cooperate in a variety of 'ways to universalize and naturalize the normative image of the human in human rights – or more precisely, the projected image of the international human rights person' (328). 'Recognizing ourselves in the figure of the implicated reader and the implication of our reading practices', he outlines, 'in the imagination of an international order based on human rights means acknowledging the ways in which we collude to naturalize the generic forms in which human variation is felt to be socially acceptable' (328).<sup>48</sup> Elizabeth Anker similarly states that 'the proliferation of human rights discourses and norms is often levied as a narrative of triumph – whether of law, of international diplomacy, or of a particular conception of the human' (224). Through, however, 'a sustained attention to the "small things" and "small places" that make up the lived realities of human experience might we begin to recast human rights with reference to their appropriate provenance', thereby creating what she refers to as 'a globalization of human rights from below' (224). Within this framework, human rights literature has 'provided the vehicle for far more than critique. An embodied politics of reading has also opened up and thereby verified those corporeal dimensions of cognition and expression that liberal formulations of human rights tend to either nullify or police' (222). She states that 'an imaginative remapping of human rights must necessarily begin with aesthetic experience – with its exemplary capacity to harness the body's many faculties of participation and belonging' (222). In this chapter, I explore how Ondaatje's treatment of human rights functions as more than a critique of their universalising tendencies, as Anker states. Unlike Slaughter, however, I do not approach the narrative as a *Bildungsroman* but as a forensic detective quest.

Ondaatje's ostensible use of the narrative of the detective story has previously been the subject of discussion by critics. Yumna Siddiqi notes Ondaatje's use of the genre of intrigue in his examination of political violence. Emily S. Davis emphasises

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<sup>48</sup> On the human rights novel see also Kay Schaffer's *Human Rights and Narrated Lives: The Ethics of Recognition* (2004), Elizabeth Swanson Goldberg's *Beyond Terror: Gender, Human Rights* (2007), James Dawes' *That the World May Know: Bearing Witness to Atrocity* (2009), and Lena Khor's *Human Rights Discourse in a Global Network: Books beyond Borders* (2016).

Ondaatje's multi-protagonist structure, subversion of the detective formula, and rejection of universalising metanarratives function to critique 'traditional Western historicism and the concepts of individual responsibility and justice that result from them' (16). 'Ondaatje's postmodern, multivocal narrative structure', she argues, 'challenges the modernist tradition of the lone detective as well as the idea that one can detect a transcendental truth and then enact justice based upon it' (16). Wendy Knepper focuses on the role of the forensic procedure of the autopsy in the novel in constructing confessional narratives, concluding that by '[p]erforming postmortems in the forensic and the figurative senses of the word, *Anil's Ghost* interrogates that meaning of the voices, presences, and signs that haunt the postcolonial subject' (57). I argue, however, that these approaches ignore or undermine the fact that the novel does not only present a detective quest but a forensic detective quest which explores the implications of the scientific method for human rights discourse.<sup>49</sup> While I agree with Davis on Ondaatje's use of the detective formula to critique Western universalising truths, I argue that she underplays the importance of Anil's position as the novel's protagonist. Ondaatje does devote more time to his presentation of the pasts and emotions of characters like Sarath and Ananda than most detective novels, however, it is Anil and her quest that brings these characters together and facilitates their questioning of truth and justice. The novel is frequently read as a postmodern detective story which subverts the tradition of the genre as one which reveals truth and achieve justice. While I agree that the novel in its advocating for multiple truths is undoubtedly informed by postmodern ideas, my reading of it as a forensic detective quest argues that it does not subvert the traditions of the genre, but rather engages with the central concerns of the genre, notably the reading of corpses as a method of identification and its connection with human rights.

Sarah Dauncey notes the increasing prominence of forensic science in Western crime novels as it 'became more established as a discipline in the twentieth century, and evolved to respond to the needs of the judicial system and law enforcement agencies' (165).<sup>50</sup> 'Although forensic scientists', she elaborates, 'are not always cast in a positive light and their technologies are not without flaw, the field is resourceful in narrative

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<sup>49</sup> See also Ronald R. Thomas' *Detective Fiction and the Rise of Forensic Science* (2003).

<sup>50</sup> See also Roxana Ferllini's *Forensic Archaeology and Human Rights Violations* (2007).

terms as it constructs accounts of the past from the examination of material debris' (165). With the Holmesian method of deduction, 'the detective transforms people and evidence into texts that can be read' by imposing 'narrative onto things and people, speaking on their behalf (165). In contrast, she argues, 'contemporary forensic narratives and accounts ... figure the scientist as a listener of the narratives told by crime scenes and the dead' (165). Forensic detective work, in Dauncey's view represents a move away from that kind of 'domination' towards 'a relation of dialogue and communion' (171). Ondaatje's text, I argue, is highly concerned with these issues, as evidenced by Anil's preoccupation with identity and need to emotionally identify with the victims of human rights abuses, as well as the importance that both the characters and the narrative grants Sailor, and her final act of the novel, which is her becoming a listener to Sarath's posthumous words. Furthermore, the significance of Ondaatje citing forensic anthropologist Clyde Snow as Anil's teacher in America has not received any attention from critics. Snow was initially renowned for his involvement with a number of prominent investigations, namely that of U.S. President John F. Kennedy's assassination, Nazi war criminal Joseph Mengele, and Egyptian pharaoh Tutankhamen. In the early 1980s, however, Snow headed the first independent investigation to apply forensic science to human rights cases, the Argentine Forensic Anthropology Team (EAAF) which was tasked with recovering and identifying the victims of human rights violations in Argentina.<sup>51</sup> 'For the first time in the history of human rights investigations,' he later said of the case, 'we began to use a scientific method to investigate violations. Although we started out small, it led to a genuine revolution in how human rights violations are investigated' (qtd. in Vulliamy). Snow's famous statement on the nature of forensic science is highly reminiscent of Anil's approach: 'bones make good witnesses – although they speak softly, they never lie and they never forget. Each bone has its own tale to tell about the past life and death of the person whose living flesh once clothed it' (243). Indeed, Ondaatje's direct consultation of Snow while writing this novel further emphasises the centrality of forensic science in relation

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<sup>51</sup> Christopher Joyce and Eric Stover give a detailed account of Snow's life and work in their 1991 *Witnesses from the Grave*. See 'Murder Most Foul' for Snow's brief account of his investigation in Sri Lanka.



to human rights in *Anil's Ghost*.<sup>52</sup> In this chapter, I therefore analyse the novel as a forensic detective quest to discover truth and attain justice for the victims of human rights abuses during the Sri Lankan civil war, a quest which ultimately fails.

### 3.1 Anil as the novel's quester

*Anil's Ghost* represents Ondaatje's second return to Sri Lanka in his work, after his 1982 memoir *Running in the Family* which depicts his experience returning to Sri Lanka during the 1970s. The similarities between Ondaatje and Anil are worth pointing out: both the author and his protagonist are native Sri Lankans who leave the country at a young age – Ondaatje at eleven and Anil at eighteen – in order to pursue education and a career in Europe and America. They return to Sri Lanka later in life and are confronted with a country that has now become unfamiliar to them, requiring both of them to reconnect with their native country. This experience results in an increased understanding of the political and cultural context of Sri Lanka. Yet while the similarities between the author and protagonist are unmistakable, it is significant to note that the novel makes no claims to be even semi-autobiographical. Nor does Anil function as an author surrogate for Ondaatje, with the two exhibiting very different reactions to returning to their native country. Ondaatje, on the one hand, is excited by his return and intrigued to relearn the country, to immerse himself with its culture and customs, and reconnect with his family. On the other hand, Anil, who has established a professional reputation in the West and now proudly carries a British passport, is significantly less eager to be back in Sri Lanka. She finds the state of being abroad exceedingly preferable. Anil generally avoids laying down roots, with her education requiring her to travel to various Western countries. Ondaatje describes how '[i]n her years abroad, during her European and North American education, Anil had courted

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<sup>52</sup> Ondaatje said of his meeting and working with Snow, 'I began the novel in 1992 and by the next year I had Anil working as a forensic anthropologist and I started to read up on various things about it. Strangely, this one archeologist in Sri Lanka mentioned Clyde Snow and that they were trying to get him to come to Sri Lanka. I'd read some of Clyde's articles, about his work in South America mostly, and then I heard that he was coming to Sri Lanka to give a weeklong class and set up a program there. I went to those weeklong sessions, so I got to know him quite well there. Then I came to Oklahoma a few years later and visited the labs with him. I sent him the manuscript to check, once I had it, and he wrote back this terrifying first note saying, "I've got about 170 points." They all were, of course, very useful—very, very minor points, some of them major. So he was a great help to me' ("Michael Ondaatje Interview").

foreignness, was at ease whether on the Bakerloo line or the highways around Sante Fe. She felt completed abroad' (54). Her subsequent employment as a forensic scientist for the United Nations also involves frequent travel, investigating human rights abuses in politically turbulent countries. Being more at ease with the experience of being abroad, she exhibits noticeable discomfort at being back in Sri Lanka after so long an absence. She is, for example, noticeably ill at ease and reticent during her first conversation after landing with a 'young official' who picks her up from the airport:

'How long has it been? You were born here, no?'

'Fifteen years.'

'You still speak Sinhala?'

'A little. Look, do you mind if I don't talk in the car on the way into Colombo – I'm jet-lagged. I just want to look. Maybe drink some toddy before it gets too late.' ...

'Toddy!' He laughed, continuing his conversation. 'First thing after fifteen years. The return of the prodigal.'

'I'm not a prodigal.' ...

'You have friends here, no?'

'Not really.' (9-10)

After her fifteen-year absence, Anil is now unfamiliar with her native country, having forgotten much of her native language and maintained no connection to close family or friends.

Anil's isolation from others and her disconnection from her country is frequently commented on by critics. Teresa Derrickson states that despite being technically a native Sri Lankan, 'Anil stands in as the novel's "Western hero"' (137). Slaughter argues that through the narrative conventions of the *Bildungsroman*, the novel 'poses the question of Anil's identity in terms of a conflict between her Sri Lankan past and her contemporary cosmopolitan habits as a "citizen of the world" who represents a court of world opinion' (187). Davis describes her as 'a diasporic figure who, though born in Sri Lanka, is perceived as an outsider by the other characters' and exhibits an 'identification with British and U.S. scientific and popular culture discourses, in particular her persistent faith in Enlightenment rationality, rather than any inherent "Sri Lankan"

perception of the world' (18). She also points out how her isolation renders Anil like the 'detective figure of the modernist American literary tradition and the British spy novel', 'the stereotypically hard-boiled loner' so common to the genre (18). However, what is overlooked by these approaches is how Anil's character is conceived of as one defined by 'distance', a notion which Ondaatje repeatedly invokes, with the term even providing the title for the novel's last chapter. This distance, I argue, does not merely refer to the distance formed as a result of emotional detachment or due to irreconcilable opinions, but also the belief that maintaining critical distance is a necessarily prerequisite of objectivity. Anil, as the novel's quester, embodies these aspects of distance, including the distance she maintains from her family and friends, as well as Sri Lanka, and the professional critical distance she perceives as rendering her investigation free from bias. Furthermore, as I will explore later in the chapter, this sense of distance is embodied in the distrust between her and Sarath as well as the pervasive sense of paranoia that imbues the entire investigation. The novel only makes brief mention of her parents, with Anil commenting that like her father she 'should have been a doctor, but [she] swerved off into forensics' reasoning that she '[d]idn't want to be like him at that time in my life, I guess', and that her mother also used to send her sarongs from Sri Lanka which she wore out of obligation (47, 10). Both her parents died in a car crash several years before the beginning of the novel, severing that connection between her and her family, as well as an important aspect of her past. She refers to a 'scattering of relatives in Colombo', yet does not wish to contact them to make them aware of her return, being 'glad to be alone' (10). Ondaatje also briefly elaborates on her past relationship with her husband, another Sri Lankan national who was also living in the U.K at the time:

He too was from Sri Lanka, and in retrospect she could see that she had begun loving him because of her loneliness. She could cook a curry with him. She could refer to a specific barber in Bambalapitiya, could whisper her desire for jaggery or jakfruit and be understood. That made a difference in the new, too brittle country. Perhaps she herself was too tense with uncertainty and shyness. She had expected to feel alien in England only for a few weeks. Uncles who had made the same journey a generation earlier had spoken romantically of their time

abroad. They suggested that the right remark or gesture would open all doors.

(141)

Here, Anil frames her marriage as a product of the alienation she felt after leaving home. Having heard romanticised versions of time spent away related by relatives, she expects to overcome her feelings of homesickness and alienation quickly. Upon finding that this is not the case, she latches on to another Sri Lankan, establishing a sense of experience over shared references and memories. However, with the deterioration and eventual dissolution of the marriage, Anil completely detaches herself from anything that reminds her of Sri Lanka. Upon his return to Colombo, she comes to the decision that there was no reason for her to maintain that connection to her native country,

there was no longer any need to remember favourite barbers and restaurants along the Galle Road. Her last conversation in Sinhala was the distressed chat she'd had with Lalitha that ended with her crying about missing egg ruling and curd with jaggery. She no longer spoke Sinhala to anyone. (145)

By the time she arrives in Sri Lanka, she lacks any connection to her family or to her past. Anil tends to find isolation preferable; she comments that anonymity and privacy are what she likes most about living in the West, having the ability to 'do things on [her] own terms' (57). Anil instead chooses to throw herself completely into her new life and her work, describing how 'She turned fully to the place she found herself in, focussing on anatomical pathology and other branches of forensics, practically memorizing Spritz and Fisher. ... She was now alongside the language of science' (145). Anil's career as a forensic scientist allows her to maintain emotional distance from friends and family. She last speaks Sinhala to her grandmother when emotionally vulnerable, being upset and homesick. As she isolates herself more in her work, however, she no longer has use for her native tongue, becoming absorbed in the 'language of science'.

Anil's distance is reminiscent of a tendency of forensic scientists who work on human rights abuses investigations, which Adam Rosenblatt describes as friction between the identity of a human rights activist and 'the scientific objectivity that is so central to their "expert" personae' (20). He argues that 'the primacy of scientific identity is woven into the structures by which forensic scientists are trained and interact with one another', with most of those 'who have worked on mass grave investigations' having

been ‘trained in the formal methods of their disciples and very little in themes such as international law or the history and philosophy of human rights’ (18). The rules are therefore ‘different for an advocacy agency whose “forum” is the general public, lawmakers, victims, and colleagues in the human rights movement that for the traditional forensic scientist’ (20). This creates a fear among forensic scientists that ‘their truth claims – already subject to doubt as to their scientific legitimacy – will be even more suspect when forensic scientists are seen as crusaders for a cause’ (20). Anil embodies the struggle between these two identities. She sees her distance from Sri Lanka as an advantage: ‘The island no longer held her by her past ... Anil had read documents and news reports, full of tragedy, and she had now lived abroad long enough to interpret Sri Lanka with a long-distance gaze’, repeatedly emphasising her objectivity and how she is there on behalf of an ‘independent organisation’, preparing ‘independent reports’ (11, 274). She believes that this distance allows her to analyse the situation objectively, that her time away from the country has rendered her free from bias. By adopting this approach, she negates the fact that her entire world-view has been formed by her education and socialisation in Europe and America. ‘The sciences and philosophies of science of peoples of European descent’, Sandra Harding argues, ‘are presumed to be purified of the religious and cultural features of their societies, whereas those of peoples of color are considered impure, permeated through and through by their religious and cultural features’ (29).<sup>53</sup> Those of ‘European descent are presumed to be capable of dispassionate objectivity, rationality, and higher mental achievement’, as opposed to “primitives” who are associated with ‘subjectivity and irrationality ... are incapable of higher mental achievements’ (Harding 29-30). This leads to a failure to grasp that ‘modern Western sciences have powerful culturally specific elements, as do other cultures’ knowledge systems’ (Harding 30). Anil embodies this kind of belief in her own rationality and freedom from bias, all the while ignoring that her preconceptions have been shaped by her Western education. For example, Anil can only comprehend the situation in Sri Lanka through a prism of Western cultural products. Davis points out that by naming the four skeletons found in the archaeological preserve

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<sup>53</sup> See also Harding’s *Is Science Multicultural?: Postcolonialisms, Feminisms, and Epistemologies* (1998) and Warwick Anderson’s ‘Postcolonial Technoscience’ (2002).

Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, and Sailor, 'Anil overtly frames her investigation within the epistemological parameters of thrillers such as John Le Carre's *Tinker, Tailor, Soldier, Spy*, where mistrust of one's colleagues is justified by the fact that anyone can be a spy' (19). This sense of distrust and paranoia will come to permeate every aspect of her quest, in particular her partnership with Sarath. Furthermore, she describes how she turns to books when she is in need of comfort, 'old friends, sentences from books, voices she could trust' (54). She cites Victor's Hugo's *Les Miserables* as her favourite book, one 'so much a favourite, so thick with human nature she wished it to accompany her into the afterlife' (54). She thereby associates the idea of human nature with a primarily Western understanding of what humanity entails. Finally, she describes how the darkest Greek tragedies were innocent compared with what was happening here. Heads on stakes. Skeletons dug out of a cocoa pit in Matale. At university Anil had translated lines from Archilochus – In the hospitality of war we left them their dead to remember us by. But here there was no such gesture to the families of the dead, not even the information of who the enemy was. (11)

Anil's education leaves her unable to understand the scale of the atrocities being committed in Sri Lanka unless she attempts to do so through a Western frame of reference. She draws comparisons with 'the darkest Greek tragedies' yet finds them inadequate to account for the 'more complicated world' she finds herself in (11). The same applies for the verses she has translated from Archilochus in which loved ones have both the bodies of the deceased, as well as knowledge of who was responsible for their deaths. Yet this is not the case in Sri Lanka, with the lack of knowledge and the lack of closure which accompanies that. This framework of Western cultural products that she surrounds herself with is thereby shown to be inadequate in her investigation. Anil's role as the novel's quester is therefore one primarily characterised by a distance maintained by her role as a forensic scientist and by her references of Western culture and cultural products. This distance, she claims, allows her to be an independent and unbiased investigator, to rationally observe evidence and discern the truth. Yet this is a belief that Ondaatje, as I will discuss in this chapter, repeatedly challenges and ultimately contradicts in his novel.

### 3.2 Anil's motivation to quest

In keeping with the distance that she exhibits in all significant aspects of her life, Anil's return to Sri Lanka is reluctant at best. She admits that her application 'to the Centre for Human Rights in Geneva, when a call had gone out for a forensic anthropologist to go to Sri Lanka had originally been halfhearted' [sic], and that she had not expected 'to be chosen, because she had been born on the island, even though she now travelled with a British passport' (15). Yet Anil cares deeply about the work she does, with the sense of distance she prioritises not rendering her a character who is unfeeling or indifferent. In undertaking this quest, Anil is driven by her desire to discover the truth about Sailor's identity, and in doing so she finds it increasingly difficult and ultimately impossible to maintain the detachment and objectivity she values. In this section, I explore how Anil's obsessive need to identify is symptomatic of her own tendency to identify with the victims she investigates. She displays a fascination with truth and naming that is foreshadowed by incidents in her past. While most of Anil's childhood remains a mystery to the reader, she does pause to reflect on her teenage interest in swimming, mentioning that she acquired early fame in Sri Lanka by winning a swimming competition when she was sixteen, something that is repeatedly commented on upon her return. Anil is frequently irritated when reminded of this, her first words to Sarath being, 'Let's not mention swimming again okay? A lot of blood under the bridge since then' (16). The significance of Anil's reflection on her swimming career has not been remarked on by critics, other than a brief mention of her waiting to distance herself from her former swimming fame.<sup>54</sup> She also, however, equates her teenage swimming to her current career as a forensic scientist, stating that 'her later obsessive tunnelling towards discovery was similar to that underwater world, where she swam within the rhythm of intense activity, as if peering through time' (69). Ondaatje makes it clear that from an early age Anil enjoyed constant 'intense activity', as well as the desire to discover, a desire that often veered into obsession. Her swimming stands as a precursor to her later career, anticipating her tendency to work to exhaustion, finding

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<sup>54</sup> See Sam Knowles (2010) who notes that her discomfort in regard to her swimming 'typifies her unease when she first returns to the island' (432).

out the past as though ‘peering through time’, and above all her relentless need for discovery at all costs.

Anil’s occupation as a forensic scientist requires her to identify the victims of murders, to provide a dead body with a name. This need to identify is not merely a facet of the job for her, rather she repeatedly displays an obsession with names and naming. Early in the narrative, she recalls one of the first conversations with her former lover Cullis:

‘I’ll never sleep with you if you say you don’t like The Artist Formerly Known as ... Do you have a difficult middle name I have to learn?’

‘Biggles.’

‘Biggles? As in Biggles Flies East and Biggles Wets His Bed?’ (37)<sup>55</sup>

In this brief exchange, she declares herself a fan of Prince, an artist who replaced his name with a symbol, before questioning Cullis about and mocking his middle name. This, however, is not the only area in which Anil displays a preoccupation with names and naming, believing, as Davis points out, that ‘names deliver truth’ (23). A further example of this preoccupation is her act of naming herself during childhood, an incident she recalls early in the narrative. During this recollection she explains how the name ‘Anil’ had not been given to her at birth, instead her parents had given her ‘two entirely inappropriate names’ (68). She had ‘very early began to desire Anil which was her brother’s unused second name’ and likens her attainment of the name as hunting down ‘a specific lover she had seen and wanted, tempted by nothing else along the way’ (68). The process by which she gained the name was lengthy and not without price. Initially she ‘tried to buy it from him ... she wanted the name more than anything else’ (68). The trade that Anil and her brother finally settled on was that she would get the name in exchange for ‘one hundred saved rupees, a pen set he had been eyeing for some time, a tin of fifty Gold Leaf cigarettes she had found, and a sexual favour he had demanded in the last hours of the impasse’ (68). According to Victoria Cook, through the act of ‘choosing a new name for herself, Anil takes on a new identity; she becomes a “stranger” to her past “self” – to the person she was before she became “Anil”’ (9). With

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<sup>55</sup>Anil’s mention of *Biggles Flies East* (1935), a novel from W. E. John’s Biggles books, functions as another example of her framework of Western cultural products.



her narrating of this childhood recollection, Anil has not only established her obsession with naming but also given a reason for her identification with Sailor and the other nameless victims. As Cook further points out, the reader is ‘not told the name she was known by for the first twelve years of her life. In fact, prior to becoming Anil, she remains un-identified; missing a name, she is akin to the nameless skeleton “Sailor”’ (9). As such, Anil feels an intense connection with not only Sailor but all the nameless victims of the investigations she works on. ‘*When I have been digging and I’m tired and don’t want to do any more*’, she explains, ‘*I think how it could be me in the grave I’m working on. I wouldn’t want someone to stop digging for me ... I always think of that when I want to quit*’ (34, emphasis in original). She repeatedly displays a tendency to intensely empathise and identify with the victims of these attacks, whether they be those who have been killed or the families awaiting news of their fate. It is this compulsion to identify with the people she is investigating that motivates her to continue working.

Anil’s concern with names is again relatable to the priorities of the forensic scientist. ‘In forensic novels’, Sidia Fiorato states, ‘the investigative and medical quests become parallel processes to a more ethical and humanitarian quest for the victims’ identity, entailing a respect for their inherent dignity when dealing with their mortal remains’ (157). ‘The body’, she continues, ‘is not only a biological specimen but a formerly living human being and this underlines its past life more than its present status of death’, ‘the immediacy of the dead body confronts us with the dignity of the cadaver as a former person, demonstrating a still strong connection with its former personhood’ (157). The forensic process thereby represents ‘the recognition of the victims’ rights to the acknowledgement of their status of juridical personae beyond death, their right to have such juridical persona restored for a dignified and legally acknowledged and sanctioned conclusion of their life’ (157-8). The novel opens with Anil and her team digging in an excavation site, not in Sri Lanka but in Guatemala:

*When the team reached the site at five-thirty in the morning, one or two family members would be waiting for them. And they would be present all day while Anil and the others worked, never leaving; they spelled each other so someone always stayed, as if to ensure that the evidence would not be lost again. (5, emphasis in original)*

These relatives are a constant presence at the sites, a constant reminder to Anil of why she must keep working herself past the point of exhaustion. They provide a '*vigil for the dead*' in the hopes that their loved ones could be made more substantial than the ghostly '*half-revealed forms*' their disappearances have reduced them to (5, emphasis in original). Yet accompanying this hope is the persistent fear, '*double-edged*' fear as Ondaatje describes it, '*that it was their son in the pit, or that it was not their son – which meant there would be further searching*' (5, emphasis in original). For them to find a body is final smothering of hope, clear proof that their son is not merely lost but murdered. Yet any other result simply means the endless searching for the actual body: '*If it became clear that the body was a stranger, then after weeks of waiting, the family would rise and leave. They would travel to other excavations ... The possibility of their lost son was everywhere*' (5, emphasis in original). The prologue therefore lays the foundation for the importance of Sailor's identification for Anil. It displays the grief of trauma of those left without closure, without any indication of what happened to their vanished loved ones. Sailor thus becomes more than one victim to Anil, he is representative of the nameless bodies, of the 'unhistorical dead' (56). By identifying Sailor – finding out his name, occupation, address – she can grant his family the knowledge of what happened to him. He is representative of all those unidentified victims whose families remain unaware of their fate: 'who was this skeleton? ... Who was he? This representative of all those lost voices. To give him a name would name the rest' (56). Anil thereby sees Sailor as more than one murdered man. For her he is representative of all the victims who remain unnamed and unidentified, whose murderers are never brought to justice, and whose families are left questioning about their disappearance. As a forensic scientist, she feels not only capable but responsible for granting victims of human rights abuses dignity in death, restoring their former personhood, granting substantiality to their ghostly '*half-revealed forms*' (5).

### 3.3 Encounters in Sri Lanka

As I mentioned earlier, Anil encounters other characters during her quest. The most prominent is Sarath, Anil's partner in the investigation and the character with whom she has the most interaction in the narrative. This also includes Ananda, a former

sculptor and painter who has now descended into alcoholism, whom they hire to reconstruct Sailor's face, and Sarath's younger brother Gamini who works as a doctor primarily in Emergency Services. While the reason for seeking out these characters is ostensibly to utilise their expertise in aid of the quest, the narrative also devotes significant time to exploring their past, opinions, and daily lives, with entire chapters of the novel devoted to introducing them into the text. While Anil remains the protagonist of the text, the other characters are elevated beyond mere aids to the quest, their existence does not begin and end with her brief sojourn in Sri Lanka. The novel depicts the utilisation of their skillset in aid of Anil's investigation, yet these characters are defined by more than their use to the quest – they have their own history, their own lives to lead. In this section, I explore how Ondaatje presents these characters as also distanced, but unlike Anil their distance is caused by trauma after decades of bloody conflict. I argue that these characters further emphasise Anil's misguided approach in her unquestioned assumption that achieving closure can heal trauma and that guilty parties are easily identifiable. Her encounters with these characters contradict this approach – an approach that Ondaatje identifies as a predominately Western one – and force her to conceive of her quest beyond binary notions of success and failure. Ananda is tasked with reconstructing Sailor's head, and upon viewing the finished product, Anil is surprised to note 'a serenity in the face she did not see too often these days. There was no tension. A face comfortable with itself. This was unexpected coming from such a scattered and unreliable presence as Ananda' (184).<sup>56</sup> Sarath reveals that Ananda's wife Sirissa had been murdered 'at the height of the campaign to wipe out resurgent rebels, and their sympathisers in the villages' (185). His reconstruction of a peaceful visage, Sarath notes, is a representation of 'what he wants of the dead ... It's been three years. He still hasn't found her. He was not always like this. The head he has made is therefore peaceful' (185-6). While Ananda descends into alcoholism, Gamini's life is reduced to '[j]ust sleep and work ... Nothing else' (132). 'My marriage disappeared', he continues, 'All that ceremony – and then it evaporated in a couple of months. I was too intense

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<sup>56</sup> Their use of facial reconstruction is another reference to Clyde Snow, who pioneered the technique. See his article, 'Reconstruction of facial features from the skull: An evaluation of its usefulness in forensic anthropology' (1970).

then. I'm probably another example of trauma, you see. That happens when there is no other life' (132). Sarath, similarly, '[s]ince the death of his wife ... had never found the old road back into the world. He broke with his in-laws ... He returned to archaeology and hid his life in his work' (277-8). Like Anil's expression of her obsessive searching for truth, Sarath also represents his trauma in terms of swimming:

he walked into the water, disappearing within its darkness. At this dark hour, out deep, there were sometimes rogue tides that would not let you return, that insisted you away. Along in the waves he would let go of himself, his body flung around as if in a dance, only his head in the air rational to what surrounded him, the imperceptible glint of large waves that he would slip beneath as they rose above him. (278)

He is 'unable to step back to the trauma of that place when he had talked in darkness pretending there was light' (279). Anil feels deeply for the traumatised individuals she encounters, later crying for 'Ananda, Sailor, their lovers. [Sarath's] brother working himself to death. There's only mad logic here, no resolving' (186). Yet Anil's approach to the resolving of trauma is inherently flawed, informed by the Eurocentric bias she has unwittingly absorbed.

I draw here on Victoria Burrow's analysis of the novel as exposing 'the way in which the developed world *turns away* from the experience of trauma that so often blights the existence of many postcolonial subjects in different parts of the developing world' which she cites as a habit 'well ingrained in the ethnocentric blindness of trauma theory itself' (162).<sup>57</sup> Derek Summerfield points out that the practice of mental health can trace its origins 'back to the valorization of reason and science ushered in by the European Enlightenment' creating a perception of psychiatric knowledge 'as neutral, objective, disinterested, and universally applicable' (233). 'Psychiatric universalism', he argues, 'risks being imperialistic, reminding us of the colonial era when what was presented to indigenous peoples was that there were different types of knowledge, and theirs was second rate' (238). 'The fundamental relativity of human experience, even in

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<sup>57</sup> See also Burrows, *Whiteness and Trauma: The Mother-Daughter Knot in the Fiction of Jean Rhys, Jamaica Kincaid and Toni Morrison* (2004), Stef Craps' *Postcolonial Witnessing: Trauma Out of Bounds* (2012) and Jay Rajiva's *Postcolonial Parabola: Literature, Tactility, and the Ethics of Representing Trauma* (2017).

extreme conditions, and the primacy of the subjective appraisal and social context, mean that there can be no such thing as a universal trauma response' (241). Ethan Watters applies Summerfield's critique of universal trauma to the response of Western therapists who rushed to provide trauma counselling to the victims of the 2004 tsunami in Sri Lanka.<sup>58</sup> He explores the assumption of 'many Western mental health specialists who focus on trauma, that the psychological reaction to horrible events is fundamentally the same around the world' (68). 'The mental health professionals who forms our generation's understanding of PTSD', he elaborates, 'have created an intricate labyrinth of ideas that includes explicit and implicit assumptions about what type of event will damage the human mind and who will be most affected' so that ultimately, 'this body of knowledge goes far beyond describing a disorder with a symptom cluster. It describes a worldview' (72-3). Watters states that 'it seemed to matter very little that most of the trauma counsellors headed to Sri had no understanding of the culture they were entering' (75). 'Few could comprehend the local languages', he continues, 'and for the most part they were unfamiliar with the population's religious beliefs, its grieving and burial rituals, or the country's long and complicated history of civil war' (75). Watters cites Mahesan Ganesan, the one psychiatrist in Eastern Sri Lanka, who noticed that the group 'setting up PTSD counselling services seldom asked leaders in the local community what they needed or desired in terms of help', in contrast to the aid group focusing on medicine, food, and shelter who 'would meet with local families to try to assess what the community was lacking' (79). The central truism of Western trauma counselling, that of 'measured reexposure or retelling of the traumatic event in counseling with a trained therapist', was not only inadequate in a Sri Lankan context but functioned to exacerbate the problem (74). Ganesan blames the trauma counsellors not only for their assumption that 'the local community did not understand their own psychological needs' but also that 'all persons would respond in a psychologically known manner to trauma and loss, and a particular universal method existed to help these people whoever they were and whatever their culture' (79). While Anil is not a therapist or councillor, Ondaatje locates her approach to resolving trauma within the

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<sup>58</sup> See also Kolitha Wickramage's 'Sri Lanka's post-Tsunami psychosocial playground: lessons for future psychosocial programming and interventions following disasters' (2006).

same Western framework. She assumes that the prerequisites for overcoming loss require attaining closure through exercising justice over the guilty parties. Anil also overlooks the fact that many of the Sri Lankans she encounters also express their trauma through a shared sense of guilt. However, with her investigation focused solely on government-sanctioned murders, she does not fully accept what the other characters repeatedly emphasise: that after decades of civil war everyone has blood on their hands.

Anil's unfamiliarity with the country as well as her tendency to assume a naïve outlook often put her at a disadvantage when talking to those who have borne witness and suffered through the war. This is true, to a certain extent, however it is also significant to note that it is not only Anil who is presented as flawed in her outlook or actions. Rather, Ondaatje emphasises that all the characters he presents are in some way responsible for wrong-doing, particularly those whom Anil considers to be her allies in the quest. An impediment to Anil's priority of achieving justice is the impossibility of distinguishing between the guilty and the innocent after such a long and bloody conflict, a facet of the civil war which Ondaatje also represents with his characters. Furthermore, as Davis point out, their collective guilt reflects 'the larger political context in which, as Sarath emphasises, everyone has blood on their hands' (26). By presenting a situation in which 'crime can no longer be accounted for by concepts of individual guilt and punishment and exists not only as a past incident but as an ongoing and epidemic problem', Ondaatje posits that 'questions of crime and justice must be addressed within a different framework than that of even the detective novel's mean streets' (Davis 26). Upon her arrival in Sri Lanka, Sarath immediately seeks to address Anil's oversimplified framework by emphasising that the complexity of the situation exceeds the scope of her investigation. 'What we've got here', he tells her, 'is unknown extrajudicial executions mostly. Perhaps by the insurgents or by the government or the guerrilla separatists. Murders committed by all sides' (17-18). He attempts to locate her investigation within the political context, appealing to her credentials as a forensic scientist by framing his summary of events with the disappearances and bodies of the victims:

The bodies turn up weekly now. The height of the terror was 'eighty-eight and 'eight-nine, but of course it was going on long before that. Every side was killing

and hiding the evidence. *Every side*. This is an unofficial war, no one wants to alienate the foreign powers. So it's secret gangs and squads. Not like Central America. The government was not the only one doing the killing. You had, and still have, three camps of enemies – one in the north, two in the south – using weapons, propaganda, fear, sophisticated posters, censorship. Importing state-of-the-art weapons from the West, or manufacturing homemade weapons. A couple of years ago people just started disappearing. Or bodies kept being found burned beyond recognition. There's no hope of affixing blame. And no one can tell who the victims are. (17, emphasis in original)

Sarath specifically frames his summary within the parameters of her investigation, relating the frequency at which people are disappearing as well as unidentified bodies being found, in the hope of making her aware of its problematic aspects. He points out her tendency to apply a totalising framework in his identification of Sri Lanka as separate from Central America, as well as the impossibility of 'affixing blame' when the victims were unidentifiable. Sarath, however, primarily wants her to understand that her sole focus on human rights abuses committed by the government presents not only an oversimplified view of the situation but also turns a blind eye to Western culpability in aggravating the conflict through arms trade.<sup>59</sup> A recent report on the international arms trade with Sri Lanka identified 'a significant gap between international actors' rhetoric and declarations about peacemaking on the one hand, and their practice of arms trade on the other' (Lindberg, Jonas et al. 9). This 'inflow of arms [was] important in escalating and fuelling the war, leading, in turn, to severe human rights abuses and to adverse effects on the economy and social welfare' (Lindberg, Jonas et al. 14). It continues that 'both the UN Security Council Guidelines for Conventional Arms Transfer and the EU Code of Conduct [state] that arms should not be transferred to countries where they risk aggravating or prolonging conflicts', with the latter specifying 'that respect for human rights and humanitarian law should be upheld by the recipient country' (Lindberg, Jonas et al. 90). 'In spite of this, and of all the well-documented human rights abuses in Sri Lanka, several EU member countries have exported arms to Sri Lanka', thereby

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<sup>59</sup> On how arms trade can exacerbate and prolong civil wars and interstate conflict see Paul Diehl's 'Arms Races and Escalation: A Closer Look' (2010).

contributing ‘to prolonging the war for 26 years’ (Lindberg, Jonas et al. 90). Ondaatje later describes the conflict as ‘a Hundred Years’ War with modern weaponry, and backers on the sidelines in safe countries, a war sponsored by gun- and drug-runners’ in which ‘political enemies were secretly joined in financial arms deals’ (43). Sarath also emphasises how the scale of human rights violations goes beyond the state-sponsored murders she is investigating but being committed by ‘every side’. ‘Whatever the government is possibly doing now’, he later tells her, ‘it was worse when there was real chaos ... the law abandoned everyone, save a few good lawyers. Terror everywhere, from all sides’ (153-4). He describes the Sri Lankan people as being ‘caught in the middle. It was like being in a room with three suitors, all of whom had blood on their hands’ (153-4). In Sarath’s view, Anil’s long absence blinds her to these complexities: ‘You don’t understand how bad things were ... You were not here for that ... We wouldn’t have survived with your rules of Westminster then’ (153-4). She makes assumptions that he locates as within the domain of visiting journalists, namely failing to adequately acknowledge the West’s complicity in prolonging the war, and assuming that the government are the only party responsible for the murders and human rights atrocities being committed. Both the Western involvement in the Sri Lankan war and the multiplicity of warring factions indicate a more complex situation than Anil’s investigation allows for, an assumption which Sarath attempts to correct. Through these characters’ interconnected trauma and sense of guilt, Ondaatje reinforces Anil’s flawed approach to achieving closure as one predominately informed by Western understandings of trauma and justice.

### **3.4 Narrating Sri Lanka as a space of failure**

In this section, I argue that the landscape in Sri Lanka during the civil war renders Anil’s quest impossible, thereby becoming a space of failure. Ondaatje depicts this space as one in which her Western approach of discovering truth of and achieving justice for human rights abuses fails due to it being oversimplified, indiscriminately applied, and lacking socio-political context. The inadequacy of her approach in a space like Sri Lanka is debated in a series of conversations about truth and justice that the characters engage in. While these debates initially refer to the truth of who Sailor was



and how he was murdered, they have broader implications for the nature and consequences of discovering and revealing the truth in the country. Anil repeatedly argues that objective truth, free from political and personal bias, can be definitively discovered and proved through the application of the scientific method, and that its revelation is the basis for positive socio-political change. The other characters who have witnessed the truth being manipulated or completely erased argue that it is more malleable and subject to partiality, and that its revelation can be dangerous. The novel's presentation of these two divergent and incompatible definitions of truth has been explored by critics. Derrickson outlines how the novel engages in a self-aware discussion of the United Nations' claims to universality in regard to human rights. 'Of concern in *Anil's Ghost*', she states, 'is not so much the issue of whether or not human rights should be stipulated, but the approach by which those rights are legislated through means of international intervention', particularly 'the idea that the "truth" of human rights violations is both, on the one hand, *discoverable*, and, on the other hand, *desirable*' (132, emphasis in original). Antoinette Burton describes the novel as engaging with the 'contest between the alleged certainties of social and physical science and the claims of "other knowledges"' which offers 'not just a narrative about the dangers of excessive faith in empiricism ("hard" evidence), but a reflection on the continued possibility of History itself as an exclusively western epistemological form' (40). While I agree with these points, I argue that they overlook that the debates on truth and justice depicted in the novel focus not only on the nature and consequences of discovering and revealing truth, but how to represent that truth, how to best construct a narrative which best reflects the truth of the socio-political situation in Sri Lanka. These discussions are informed by Ondaatje self-awareness of his own position as a narrator of, at the time of the novel's publication, an ongoing civil war. As Julie McGonegal states, Ondaatje's self-consciousness 'of the potentially problematic consequences of his own ambivalent relation, as someone having lived much of his adult life in Canada, to his country of origin' render him wary of 'reproducing a discourse or "fiction" of the Sri Lankan conflict that discounts the stories of those actually engaged in the work of surviving in a country characterized by unremitting violence' (67). He reiterates this

wish during an interview with Maya Jaggi in response to her questioning whether he went on research trips in creating his novel.

To a certain extent. It was more a case of listening and talking to people; being passive in the way I listened, which I tend to do with a book, rather than going out and trying to grab ‘the truth’, as we do in the West, as though we know how we can solve the dilemma; as if we would know how to fix it. (254)

He thus positions himself in between Sri Lanka and the West, a position reflected in his protagonist. ‘Anil’s “in-between” location’, as Manav Ratti terms it, ‘facilitates the ethical problematic reflecting Ondaatje’s diasporic nationalistic concerns: what is Sri Lanka, how can it be represented?’ (122) Ratti’s analysis, however, downplays how essential the debates on truth that the Sri Lankan characters engage in are to this representation, particularly due to their fundamental concern with how to approach as truthful a representation of the socio-political conditions of the country as possible.

Towards the end of her time in Sri Lanka, Anil recalls a conversation she had with Gamini in which he predicts her departure, framing it within the kind of Western narrative which typically ends with the hero getting on a plane, his brief sojourn in a foreign country already becoming a memory:

‘American movies, English books – remember how they all end?’ Gamini asked that night. ‘The American or Englishman gets on a plane and leaves. That’s it. The camera leaves with him. He looks out of the window at Mombasa or Vietnam or Jakarta, someplace now he can look at through the clouds. The tired hero. A couple of words to the girl beside him. He’s going home. So the war, to all purposes is over. That’s enough reality for the West. It’s probably the history of the last two hundred years of Western political writing. Go home. Write a book. Hit the circuit.’ (285-6)

Gamini exhibits cynical frustration at the way Sri Lanka, as well as other countries which can be shaped to fit into this narrative, are depicted in Western media. The listing of Mombasa, Vietnam, and Jakarta are co-opted into a catalogue of interchangeable, far-off countries superficially characterised by turbulent politics and exotic locations. The American or British traveller is able to briefly visit the country, immerse himself in an exciting sense of danger and intrigue, but ultimately leave when he has had ‘enough

reality'. It is at the point that the narrative would end with the hero on a plane, sparing a brief glance back while enjoying a romantic encounter with the girl sitting next to him. His stories of political danger in exotic locations can then be packaged and sold as the truth, further promoting a distorted construction of the political situation. This narrative ensures that the attention is constantly maintained on the hero, beginning and ending with his arrival and departure, thereby reducing the country and its inhabitants to an exotic background for his adventures.

Ondaatje, I argue, ostensibly sets up his novel and its protagonist to seemingly conform to this narrative. The novel's promotion reflects this preoccupation, describing how its protagonist is sent to investigate 'the organized campaigns of murder engulfing the island. What follows is a story about love, about family, about identity, about the unknown enemy, about the quest to unlock the hidden past – a story propelled by a riveting mystery' (*Anil's Ghost*). Anil initially arrives in Sri Lanka with an expectation of this narrative, that she will discover the truth, file her report, and proceed on to the next investigation. Her commitment to this narrative's uncomplicated understanding of truth is reflected in her unquestioning acceptance of her mission to find evidence of human rights abuses in Sri Lanka, specifically murders committed by the Sri Lankan government. Although her initial application had been submitted half-heartedly, once it is accepted she commits to the investigation with the same determination and single-mindedness she displayed in previous assignments. This begins once she finds a bone fragment from a recent skeleton in a sample of material from a sixth-century burial site, to which only government officials were allowed access. She then convinces a more reluctant Sarath to obtain a permit to enter the archaeological preserve, in which they find four skeletons, three ancient and one recent 'whose bones were still held together by dried ligaments, partially burned' (50). They deduce that this man, whom they nickname Sailor, had been murdered in another location by a government official before being brought onto the archaeological site to be hidden and buried. Anil becomes convinced that if they manage to identify Sailor then they could compile a concrete case against the government: 'But we can prove this, don't you see? This is an opportunity, it's traceable. We found him in a place that only a government official could get into' (52). Thus far, from Anil's perspective her mission appears to be clearly mapped out;

she was sent to Sri Lanka to find evidence of human rights abuses committed by the government, and Sailor's discovery provides hard evidence of this crime. Her unquestioning acceptance of her mission, I argue, also largely stems from her education and experience as a forensic scientist which has instilled in her a belief in the irrefutable objectivity of the scientific facts. She blindly trusts in the scientific method to reveal universal truths: 'She began to examine the skeleton again under sulphur light, summarizing the facts of his death so far, the permanent truths, same for Colombo as for Troy' (64). It is within this framework that Ondaatje invokes Snow as a character in the novel: 'She remembered Clyde Snow, her teacher in Oklahoma, speaking about human rights work in Kurdistan: *One village can speak for many villages. One victim for many victims*' (176). She interprets these 'permanent truths' through the framework established during her training as a forensic scientist, believing them to take precedence over the specifics of the socio-political context of the country. Through Anil's education and work in Britain and America, Ondaatje thus critiques the narrative in which the same framework is therefore applied to each investigation regardless of specificities of history or culture; Colombo, Kurdistan, and Guatemala are all interchangeable within it.

As Derrickson points out, it is in the very simplicity of her orders that reveal cause for concern, the fact that she has been tasked by the UN to gather evidence solely of human rights abuses committed by the government. During a conversation between Gamini, Sarath, and herself, Anil is challenged on the narrative that frames her quest:

'Anyway, these guys who are setting off the bombs are who the Western press calls freedom fighters. ... And you want to investigate the *government*?'

'There are innocent Tamils in the south being killed too,' Sarath said. "Terrible killings. You should read the reports.'

'I get the reports ... We're all fucked, aren't we. We don't know what to do about it. We just throw ourselves into it. Just no more high horses, please. This is a war on foot.'

'Some of the reports ...' she said. 'There are letters from parents who have lost their children. Not something you can put aside, or get over in a hurry.' (133, emphasis in original)

Yet despite her growing awareness that the government's human rights violations do not comprise the whole narrative, Anil holds firmly to her UN-sanctioned mandate, 'in all the turbulent history of the island's recent civil wars, in all the token police investigations, not one murder charge had been made during the troubles. But this could be a clear case against the government' (176). Sarath functions as the novel's most substantial critic of Anil's more simplistic view on the objective nature of truth:

'You like to remain cloudy, don't you Sarath, even to yourself.'

'I don't think clarity is necessarily truth. It's simplicity, isn't it?'

'I need to know what you think. I need to break things apart to know where someone came from. That's also an acceptance of complexity. Secrets turn powerless in the open air.'

'Political secrets are not powerless, in any form,' he said.

'But the tension and danger around them, one can make them evaporate. You're an archaeologist. Truth comes finally unto the light. It's in the bones and sediment.'

'It's in the character and nuance and mood.'

'That is what governs us in our lives, that's not the truth.'

'For the living it is the truth,' he quietly said. (259)

By locating truth within the 'character and nuance and mood' of Sri Lanka, Sarath presents a direct contradiction of Anil's notion of 'permanent truths' located in 'bones and sediment'. He argues that her investigation is oversimplified and does not take into account the complexities involved in such a situation, exhibiting a tendency to leap to conclusions and overlook significant factors which reveals its inherent bias. Sarath presents truth as more complex and malleable than Anil's narrative allows for, while warning of the dangers of the revelation of this narrative.

For her the journey was in getting to the truth. But what would the truth bring them into? It was a flame against a sleeping lake of petrol. ... There were dangers in handing truth to an unsafe city around you. As an archaeologist Sarath believed in truth as a principle. That is, he would have given his life for the truth if the truth were of any use. (156-7)

While Anil's is singularly focused on successfully completing her quest, 'getting to the truth', Sarath questions the implications and consequences of revealing truth that she ignores or dismisses. Through Sarath, Ondaatje presents a critique of the Western depiction of Sri Lanka, with him warning Anil that, 'You can't just slip, make a discovery and leave ... Or you'll be like those journalists who file reports about flies and scabs while staying at the Galle Face Hotel' (44). 'That false empathy and blame...', he continues, 'That's how we get seen in the West. It's different here, dangerous. Sometimes law is on the side of power not truth.' (44). He harbours a particular disdain towards foreign journalists, those who promote a biased and inaccurate representation of the country by 'breaking the truth up into suitable pieces' and having it printed next to 'irrelevant photographs'. In his view, visiting journalists' tendency to employ this kind of 'flippant gesture towards Asia', fail to take into account that it has the potential to incite further violence, 'new vengeance and slaughter' (156-7).

The two remain at an impasse throughout the novel, with both refusing to concede any ground to the other. Anil's inability to understand the implications of Sarath's position engender mistrust within her: 'I don't know where you stand ... I know that you feel the purpose of truth is more complicated here, that it is sometimes more dangerous here if you tell the truth' (53). Due to Sarath's reluctance she mistrusts him and his motivations where their investigation is concerned. Yet Anil's suspicion of Sarath mainly stems from the fact that he works for the government and was ostensibly sent to keep an eye on her: 'He was high up in the state-sponsored Archaeological Department, so how much a part of the government was he? Was he its ear and eye while assigned to aid her in the Human Rights investigation and report?' (28) Her presence in Sri Lanka was dependent on her accepting him as her partner in this investigation. From her perspective, his partnership effects the credibility of her work, causing her to question who she actually works for and how she could indict the government with one of their officials as her partner. While they have built up a bond due to their shared experiences, towards the end of the novel Anil shows that she still does not trust him. After not hearing from him for five days 'her fear about him rose again – the relative who was a minister, his views on the danger of truth' (269). Her

distrust in him and inability to understand his position leads her to publicly present their findings in front of various Sri Lankan officials, despite no longer having possession of the evidence. This forces Sarath to dismiss her findings in an exchange which becomes their final debate on truth, only more public and with higher stakes than any prior:

‘What I wish to report is that some government forces have possibly murdered innocent people. This is what you are hearing from me. You as an archaeologist should believe in the truth of history.’

‘I believe in a society that has peace, Miss Tissera. What you are proposing could result in chaos. Why do you not investigate the killing of government officers?’ (275)

Such a report does not allow for the importance of context that Sarath emphasises but rather presents Sailor as evidence of the legitimacy of Anil’s mandate to find evidence of state-sponsored murders. In the face of scientific truths, Sarath’s appeal for ‘character and nuance and mood’ fades from importance and his prediction of further chaos and slaughter after its revelation comes true after he is killed for his involvement. Yet Sarath’s death also represents the bridging of the conflict between them. Sarath, who responded to his trauma by burying himself in work in order to distance himself from the atrocities occurring in his country, found in Anil a truth worth emerging into public scrutiny for. She ensures Sarath that Sailor’s investigation is not just another job to her and he can see the change in her as she presents evidence during the trial, ‘she was no longer just a foreign authority. Then he heard her say, “I think you murdered hundreds of us.” *Hundreds of us*. Sarath thought to himself. Fifteen years away and she is finally *us*’ (272). Anil’s closing of the distance between herself and her Sri Lankan nationality motivates Sarath to overcome his own distance, giving his life to ensure that Anil leaves with Sailor’s skeleton: ‘this afternoon, he had returned to the intricacies of the public world, with its various truths ... He knew he would not be forgiven that’ (279). Sarath’s death furthermore makes it so Anil’s last action in the novel is not her completing her report and leaving Sri Lanka, rather she listens to a tape recording he made and hid in Sailor’s ribcage: ‘She walked away from the skeleton and paced up and down the hold listening to his voice again. Listening to everything again’ (284). Anil final action is therefore not one in which she constructs or contributes to a foreign narrative, but one in

which she listens to another's. It is in this moment that the distance between them is bridged, and Ananda subsequently confirms the reader's suspicions that the titular Anil's ghost is not Sailor but Sarath, 'the woman Anil will always carry the ghost of Sarath Diyasena' (305). As she walks away from Sailor, the importance of establishing guilt over his murder and assigning blame fades in light of Sarath's sacrifice and listening to his posthumous words. This assures that Anil is not returning as the triumphant Western hero Gamini describes, or as one of the visiting journalists that Sarath disdains. Rather, as he wished, she is learning to locate hard evidence within the 'character and nuance and mood' of Sri Lanka.

### **3.5 The failure of Anil's quest**

The subsequent events following Anil's presentation of their evidence show the quest to have been doomed to failure. This failure and her departure from Sri Lanka were repeatedly foreshadowed in the novel, even by Anil herself. As he assumed earlier in the narrative, Sarath gave 'his life for the truth', yet it seems unlikely that it would be 'of any use'. His sacrifice, however, does allow Anil to escape not only with her life but with Sailor's skeleton and the evidence of his murder. Yet the reader is left unaware of what action, if any, results from this. Given that the novel has repeatedly emphasised the inadequacy of the United Nations' flawed attempts at justice in countries like Sri Lanka, it would be more likely that the report, once filed, had no effect. It is significant to note that from the onset, the likelihood of this failure is repeatedly foreshadowed by Anil herself. Despite her optimism about the power of truth, she is aware of the precedent of investigations being unfruitful. At the beginning of the novel she recalls how '[o]ver the years complaints from Amnesty International and other civil rights groups had been sent to Switzerland and resided there glacierlike' while the president 'claimed no knowledge of organized campaigns of murder on the island' (16). She later recalls how '[e]arly investigations had led to no arrests, and protests from organisations had never reached even the mid-level of police or government. Requests for help by parents in their search for teenagers were impotent (420). It was only 'under pressure, and to placate trading partners in the West, [that] the government eventually made the gesture of an offer to pair local officials with outside consultants ... Nobody at the Centre for Human Rights



was very hopeful about it' (16). Anil also foreshadows the abrupt ending of her investigation early in the novel: 'The grand logos on letterheads and European office doors meant nothing where there was crisis. If and when you were asked by a government to leave, you left. You took nothing with you' (28-9). From the onset of her quest, therefore, Anil shows an awareness that previous human rights investigations had been unsuccessful. She, however, is not disheartened by these previous failures nor does she consider changing her approach. She knows that her presence in Sri Lanka is a mere formality, a gesture to maintain the security of trading relationships, and that her investigation could be unceremoniously ended at any time and she would be expected to leave the country emptyhanded. Yet she considers these unfavourable odds a challenge, and despite her repeated acknowledgements that she may be unsuccessful, Anil is still shocked and devastated when the Sri Lankan government forces her to leave the country. Her repeatedly foreshadowing of the unlikeliness of a successful investigation does not render her failure any easier to contend with.

Yet the narrative significantly does not end with Anil's flight from Sri Lanka, indeed, the novel doesn't end with her at all. Instead it touches on three significant moments in which she isn't even present: Gamini's discovery of Sarath's body, the assassination of President Katugala, a fictional account inspired by the real assassination of President Ranasinghe Premadasa in 1993, and finally, Ananda's work restoring an ancient statue of Buddha. Gamini's tender and emotional handling of his brother's body and dressing of his wounds is in direct contrast to the assumed detachment of the forensic method: 'He could heal his brother, set the left leg, deal with every wound as if he were alive, as if treating the hundred small traumas would eventually bring him back to life' (287). It represents a moment of peace between the two that they too rarely experience in their fractured relationship as Gamini realises that 'that this would be the end or it could be the beginning of a permanent conversation with Sarath. If he did not talk to him in this moment, admit himself, his brother would disappear from his life' (288). As Gamini sits with his brother, this personal moment of grief is immediately followed by another brutally violent political attack:

At four p.m. on National Heroes Day, more than fifty people were killed instantly, including the President. The cutting action of the explosion shredded

Katugala into pieces. The central question after the bombing concerned whether the President had been spirited away, and if so whether by the police and army forces or by terrorists. Because the President could not be found.

*Where was the President?* (294, emphasis in original)

The depiction of the assassination of the President follows in the pattern of unremitting violence that Ondaatje has established. While Anil has been primarily concerned with violence sponsored by the government, the attack on the government carries the same trademarks that characterises political violence in Sri Lanka: the murder of bystanders in the chaos, the lack of knowledge of who the guilty are, and the loss of the victim's body as physical evidence. The discovery and exposing of the truth, therefore, failed to lead to peace as Anil supposes, but rather to a prolonging of the cycle of violence.

Ondaatje, however, does not end his novel on this political attack but with a final section entitled 'Distance' which pauses to reflect on Ananda instead. While restoring the Buddha statue, Ananda is able to see through its eyes, to perceive the world in all its entirety, enjoying the peace of isolation and distance,

Ananda briefly saw this angle of the world. There was a seduction for him here. The eyes he had cut and focussed with his father's chisel showed him this. The birds drove towards gaps within the trees! They flew through the shelves of heat currents. The tiniest hearts in them beating exhausted and fast, the way Sirissa had died in the story he invented for her in the vacuum of her disappearance. A small brave heart. In the heights she loved and in the dark she feared. (307)

Yet Ondaatje does not allow Ananda to maintain that distance, to seclude himself from human existence like Sarath and Anil. Rather he is brought by down to earth through human contact with his nephew, '[h]e felt the boy's concerned hand on his. This sweet touch from the world' (307). By ending the novel this 'sweet touch' rather than the outcome of Anil's quest, Ondaatje posits an alternative way of beginning to reconcile with trauma, one that is not rooted in retributive justice but in the closing of distance through human connection.<sup>60</sup> 'The central affective gesture offered as a means of passing beyond trauma in Ondaatje's novel is the intersubjective empathy of the human touch', Victoria Burrows states (175). The maintaining of distance and lack of human

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<sup>60</sup> See also Milena Marinkova's *Michael Ondaatje: Haptic Aesthetics and Micropolitical Writing* (2011).

connection is represented in the novel through the refusal to touch: ‘There had been no touching between [Gamini] and Sarath, not a handshake’, ‘In all her time with Sarath, [Anil] realized, he had hardly touched her. With Sarath she felt simply *adjacent*’ (129, 187, emphasis in original). On the other hand, she recalls the communal moment of touch she shares first with Gamini and later with Ananda, ‘Gamini’s shaking her hand in the night hospital, his sleeping head on her lap that one night had been more personal’ (187). She similarly notes how ‘Ananda had touched her in a way she could recollect no one ever having touched her, except perhaps Lalitha. Or perhaps her mother somewhere further back in her lost childhood’ (187-188). *Anil’s Ghost* presents a cast of characters who are all emotionally distanced in some form due to their experiences and traumas. Anil exhibits this not only in her literal distance from Sri Lanka in her time away but also in her emotional disconnection from other people. The Sri Lankan characters she encounters exhibit a similar distance as result of their trauma; Sarath and Gamini are estranged from each other and both bury themselves in their work, Ananda has descended into alcoholism, and Sarath and Anil can never manage to trust each other. Yet as the novel progresses, they begin to close this distance. It is Anil’s connection with the other characters that causes her to reaffirm her identity as a Sri Lankan, while Sarath’s connection to Anil causes him to emerge from his work into the public sphere and take a stand. In Gamini’s sitting with his brother’s body, the two find a peace in death they never could in life. Finally, Ananda is brought back to the world through human connection with his nephew, that ‘sweet touch’ as he terms it. Ondaatje suggests that the solution to the Sri Lankan crisis is to be located ‘not in the ideas of liberal humanism and not in the politically charged motives of a Western-based human rights discourse’, but rather ‘in the simple show of compassion that travels from person to person ... a hand of concern from the physical world, not a hand from the ideological world of global humanitarianism’ (Derrickson 149). The importance of human connection is further emphasised by Ondaatje during a speech he gave when presented with the Governor-General’s English-language Fiction Award for *Anil’s Ghost*, which ended with the following comment registering his hope that the novel would be received ‘as a communal book, in a time when there seems to be little chance of a solution to the acts of violence, on all sides. “Pacifism,” “reconciliation,” “forgiveness”’, he continues,

‘are easily mocked and dismissed words. But only those principles will save us’ (“My thank-you”). Anil does not initially subscribe to this philosophy. Her distance from Sri Lanka and Western education causes her to assume an approach based on the totalising rhetoric of human rights discourse in her forensic investigation. Her attempts at reconciliation involve seeking retributive justice for the human rights abuses that have been committed, an approach that Ondaatje characterises as being informed by a flawed and oversimplified understanding of the socio-political situation. He locates its potential for success of Anil’s quest as intrinsically rooted in failure; Anil achieving her aim would not result in any justice but in vengeance and yet more violence. Through the discourse on human rights the novel partakes in and the failure of Anil’s forensic detective quest, I argue that Ondaatje goes beyond a mere critique of the totalising and Eurocentric nature of so-termed universal human rights and the connected approach of addressing its violations. Rather than oversimplified Western notions of truth and justice, he emphasises the need for socio-politically localised methods of dealing with failure, and above all, the importance of human connection and community in moving past it.

In this chapter, I began by contextualising the novel within the framework of the discourse surrounding notions of human rights and universality and argued that Ondaatje explores this idea specifically through the genre of the forensic detective novel. I argued that human right literature is an essential aspect of the forensic detective novel due to its inherent concern with the identification of unknown victims of crimes and its seeking to grant them dignity in death, concerns which Anil is intensely invested in. Anil herself, I argued, is a character primarily identifiable by distance, whether it be from others or from her native country, something which is reflected in the Sri Lankan she encounters who are distanced as a result of trauma and guilt following the long and bloody civil war. This sense of distance causes her to approach each forensic investigation through the same universal framework, an approach that Ondaatje defines as perpetuating a Western narrative which serves to distort and oversimplify the socio-political reality of living in Sri Lanka. The novel’s depiction of its space of failure thus takes the form of a debate on truth which the characters engage in, one which, I have argued, is primarily concerned with how to truthfully present a narrative which is

informed by local context, 'character and nuance and mood' as Sarath describes it. The failure of Anil's quest for universal truth and retributive justice presents an alternative to the cycle of violence that has so far been ever-present in the novel. Rather, Ondaatje's novel advocates for 'easily mocked' values of pacifism, reconciliation, and forgiveness in healing trauma from human rights violations, an advocacy which in the text only gains plausibility through the failure of its quest.

#### 4. Julia Kristeva's *Possessions*

Any consideration of Julia Kristeva's fiction must take into account that she is primarily regarded as a theoretical critic rather than a novelist. The five novels she has published since 1992 are dwarfed by her critical oeuvre spanning forty years and ranging from semiotics to psychoanalysis to literary theory. It is therefore unsurprising that her theoretical work attracts more critical evaluation than her comparatively less prolific and more recent turn to fiction. Hestia Szu-Chin's *French Feminist Theory Exemplified Through the Novels of Julia Kristeva* and Benigno Trigo's *Kristeva's Fiction* currently remain the only full-length analyses dedicated primarily to her novels. In the latter, Trigo points out the tendency of academic critics to privilege Kristeva's theoretical work above her literary work, and thereby reduce the novels to fictional exemplifications of her theory (12). This results in a large number of scholarly works which try to identify such examples, often limiting the scope to a reading primarily through Kristeva's theory. In this chapter, while engaging with Kristeva's critical work specifically on her feminist critique and treatment of motherhood, I will primarily consider the novel in its own right. Published in French in 1996 and translated into English in 1998, *Possessions* is the second instalment in a trilogy of detective novels.<sup>61</sup> The trilogy follows Stephanie Delacour, a journalist who often travels to the fictional city of Santa Varvara and attempts to navigate her way through its systemic crime and corruption. This chapter focuses on *Possessions* as the novel which most prominently utilises the format of the detective quest narrative, presenting Stephanie as a hybrid of detective and journalist as she attempts, and fails, to expose and bring to justice her friend's murderer.

The novel begins as most detective stories do, with a dead body, that of Gloria Harrison, a wealthy translator and mother to a deaf boy, who is found 'lying in a pool of blood with her head cut off' (3). The murder is under the official investigation of Police Captain Rilsky, yet the narrative follows Stephanie Delacour as she attempts to investigate the circumstances of Gloria's life that led to her being decapitated. The novel

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<sup>61</sup> *Possessions* is preceded by *The Old Man and the Wolves* (1994) and followed by *Murder in Byzantium* (2006)

gradually reveals that Gloria was in fact the victim of not one but three ‘murders’ that evening, having been first strangled by her lover, then stabbed by an escaped serial killer, and finally beheaded by her son’s speech therapist Pauline Gadeau.<sup>62</sup> The police arrest the perpetrators of the first two crimes, prematurely declaring the case solved without locating Gloria’s head or identifying Pauline as the culprit of the final murder. Stephanie eventually discovers that Pauline is responsible for the beheading, yet chooses to remain silent about her discovery, thus allowing the final crime to remain unsolved and its perpetrator to escape justice. I will begin the chapter by exploring how *Possessions* functions as a female version of the quest narrative, a genre that since its inception has been heavily male-dominated. My analysis of this novel seeks to address this issue by analysing a female quest which at its centre prioritises the problems inherent in representing female narratives. I then examine how Stephanie functions as the novel’s quester, arguing that she bears witness to the murder victim Gloria by taking an emotional approach, prioritising listening rather than seeing. In my analysis of her motivation, I argue that Stephanie is more concerned with investigating Gloria’s life rather than death, emotionally identifying with Gloria in an attempt to create a narrative that adequately represents the two women. I subsequently focus on the characters she encounters, arguing that they all attempt to construct a narrative of Gloria, a concern that is reflected in the novel’s keen interest in speaking and not speaking as a defining aspect of the characters’ relationships to each other. I will then explore the space of failure that Kristeva depicts with her fictional city of Santa Varvara, arguing that each murder corresponds to a facet of Gloria’s identity that engendered resentment from the people. The final section will focus on Stephanie’s failure to reveal the final, and most important, murder, the decapitation, thus ensuring that Gloria’s story is never told and the narrative propagated by the official investigation remains a distorted and incomplete one.

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<sup>62</sup> I read this as three murders rather than one murder followed by the tampering of a corpse because, first and foremost, the novel never describes them as anything other than murders, and secondly because, as I will discuss later in this chapter, each murder represents an aspect of Gloria resented by the Santavarvarans that ultimately caused the failure of the quest. See Goodman on how the murders correspond to Kristeva’s articulation of the symbolic and semiotic and ultimately function to resolve the tension between the two.

The quest genre, as I noted in the first chapter, has long been a male-dominated genre, locating women's roles in the narrative as that of side characters or rewards.<sup>63</sup> My reading of the quest narrative depicted by Kristeva in *Possessions*, however, does not only seek to contest this issue by featuring a female quester. Rather, the quest narrative here, I argue, explores and problematises the very act of listening to female experiences and forming a narrative which in its telling can represent the subject in all her complexity. Kristeva approaches the quest, specifically the detective quest, through the perspective of a psychoanalyst. 'That a psychoanalyst should write a detective novel should hardly surprise us', states Juliana de Nooy on Kristeva's attraction to detective novels. De Nooy cites the similarities between psychoanalysis and detective novels. Both practices emerged and flourished at the same time historically, with 'Poe's stories [foreshadowing] psychoanalytical developments and Conan Doyle and Freud [being] strict contemporaries' (114). Psychoanalysis and detective fiction both 'promote an interpretative practice that is attentive to clues, to the uncanny, and to the pathological. Both seek truth through the rehearsal of past events. And both are concerned with cases' (114). Amy Yang reinforces this connection in her article 'Psychoanalysis and Detective Fiction: a tale of Freud and criminal storytelling', but further points out how psychoanalysis 'offered a fresh new approach to solving crime. No longer was it enough to simply describe the events that unfolded in a crime incident, nor was it satisfactory to end the story at the discovery of the murderer' (597). 'The readers wanted more than just plot – the notion of *motive* and *intent* had become an important element of the storytelling' (597). '[W]ith the introduction of the unconscious mind into mainstream discussion, psychoanalysis offered a concept more intriguing than just the obvious, surface motive' by delving 'into the criminal's mind, teasing out the underlying driving force for murder, even if the criminal was not actively aware of it at the time of crime' (597).<sup>64</sup> Kristeva accordingly dedicates much of the novel to exploring not only the criminal's motivations and intentions but those of all her characters, often at the expense of the plot which is paused in favour of illuminating the character's actions. Indeed,

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<sup>63</sup> See Lori M. Campbell's edited collection *A Quest of Her Own: Essays on the Female Hero in Modern Fantasy* (2014).

<sup>64</sup> See also Patrick ffrench's 'Open Letter to Detectives and Psychoanalysts: Analysis and Reading' (2016).



rather than focusing on the investigation, the novel often digresses from the plot in order to explore the characters' emotions. The primary exemplar of this tendency is Gloria herself, whose traumatic past and fraught personal relationships are repeatedly analysed by Stephanie in the novel. Chanter and Ziarek discuss Kristeva's view of art displaying 'a preference for a "culture of words" over a "culture of images"' as a method to 're-establish the connection between the semiotic and the symbolic', questioning whether it emerges as merely playing 'a therapeutic role' (8).<sup>65</sup> This runs the risk of developing an 'aesthetics of malady' which with its narrow focus on the personal aspects of the psyche thereby disregards the political.<sup>66</sup> Yet, as Kristeva notes in *Intimate Revolt*, the prioritisation of the culture of words over that of the image is a method through which the political can be broached: 'Alongside and in addition to the culture of the image – its seduction, its swiftness, its brutality, and its frivolity – the culture of words, the narrative and the place it reserves for mediation, ... [offers] a minimal variant of revolt' (5). The priority of words over images is reflected in *Possessions* which, I argue, is highly concerned with how a spoken narrative can offer a more complete depiction of a subject, particularly a female subject, than a visual one. Throughout the novel, Stephanie's main concern is narrating against a false image of Gloria, one that is told in terms of visual storytelling, and seeks to form a narrative of words, which can be related orally and listened to. Through this process, Stephanie seeks to bear witness to Gloria, both in life and death, and thereby giving voice to a friend who has been silenced. The narrative that she attempts to create is not just a personal story of Gloria's life and death but a political narrative of a foreign, career-oriented woman and the resentment, even hatred, that she

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<sup>65</sup> This resonates with what Kristeva says of her desire to write detective stories: 'I date it as some months before the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, when my father was assassinated in a Bulgarian hospital. It was a very, very difficult experience for me. When I arrived, after he was dead, the family was not informed of the cause of his death. We could make no inquiry as to who was the criminal who had done it. And finally he was, without our permission, cremated, which was wholly contrary to his religious belief. It was very, very difficult for me to recover from this grief - to mourn. In this situation the detective story imposed itself on me, without any voluntary act on my part' ("The ideas interview").

<sup>66</sup> Chanter and Ziarek's edited volume *Revolt, Affect, Collectivity: The Unstable Boundaries of Kristeva's Polis* (2005) seeks to address the criticism of Kristeva that her work focuses 'primarily on the personal and psychic maladies of modern Western subjectivity rather than on group formations of the political structures of oppression' (1). They argue that such criticism presupposes a stable distinction between the public and private that overlooks her 'work on affect, such as abjection, disgust, pleasure, or melancholia, not only challenges this distinction but also elucidates the process of the traversable private/public boundaries' (1).

engenders. Stephanie is trying to narrate against a distorted and incomplete narrative of Gloria, one composed of words rather than images, one that must be listened to rather than seen. It is specifically in the fact that she fails in her quest to do so that the novel locates the problematics in representing female experience, particularly women who do not conform to societal expectations.

#### 4.1 Stephanie as the novel's quester

The actual detective plot only comprises a small part of the novel, with multiple digressions and tangents interjecting into the plot and interrupting the narrative flow. The investigation is paused in favour of allowing for ruminations on subjects familiar to readers of Kristeva's critical work – including psychoanalysis, feminist theory, linguistics, art history, and literary criticism – as well as exploring the traumatic pasts of its three principle female characters, Stephanie, Gloria, and Pauline. The novel's tendency to digress from its detective plot is made evident in the first few pages. The brutally abrupt first sentence – 'Gloria was lying in a pool of her own blood with her head cut off' – sets the crime scene and is followed by a graphic description of what remains of Gloria's body (3). In an attempt to cope with the sight in front of her and the chaos surrounding Gloria's body, Stephanie begins ruminating on the various examples of decapitations depicted in art, explaining this by stating that '[a]mid all the hassle that follows a crime, a sensitive soul like me likes to pause for thought' (6).<sup>67</sup> The surrounding police officers' interjections are barely able to break through her stream of consciousness until she eventually concludes that 'try as I might to call painters and sculptors, the Terror and '93 to the rescue, such cultural digressions solved strictly nothing' (10). 'The opening scene contrasts male and female ways of thinking', Judith Ryan points out (109). While 'Rilsky and his second-in-command are inspecting the body and exchanging thoughts about the situation', 'Stephanie's rambling reflections create a strong retarding moment, breaking the forward movement we expect at the opening of a detective novel' (Ryan 109). The opening scene in which Stephanie first sees her friend's body and attempts to take refuge in art is essential in informing her

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<sup>67</sup> These deliberations can be considered a precursor to Kristeva's *The Severed Head: Capital Visions* (2012), her exploration of the various iconography of severed heads in art and sculpture.

character, and particularly, how she functions as the novel's quester. 'Art protects from horror and makes it possible to face it', Colin Davis states, 'It provides a way of looking by not looking, of contemplating the headless body and *seeing it as something else*. Thus, the traumatic insistence can only be seen for what it is by being seen *otherwise*' (145). It 'cannot be witnessed directly; the witness sees only what she is capable of seeing, the thing in so far as it can be known, mediated by perceptions which make it visible whilst also masking it from sight' (145). While like Davis I also prioritise the act of seeing, or not seeing, such readings overlook the other sense that Kristeva emphasises in bearing witness to Gloria's body, that of hearing. This image of Gloria is too overwhelming for Stephanie to look at directly. Indeed, it is that very sight that causes her to attempt distance by listing famous decapitations in art and what leads her to conclude that such a scene ought to be heard rather than seen. Stephanie's emphasis on listening in opposition to seeing is first evident in the final image of decapitation that she pauses on before turning her attention back to the crime scene. She recalls Caravaggio's *The Beheading of Saint John the Baptist* (1608) and focuses not on the figure of St John but on an elderly woman in the background whom she describes as stopping her ears. She therefore concludes that 'a decapitation is meant to be heard not seen!', continuing,

*All painting ought to be heard. But how?*

A decapitation marks the limit of the visible. The show is over, ladies and gentlemen, move along please! There's nothing to see! Open your ears instead, if they're not too sensitive. The deepest depths of horror can't be seen, though perhaps they may be heard. Put away the palettes? Hear, hear! (8, emphasis in original)

This is the first indication that Stephanie will be differentiating her approach in attempting to solve the murder from the official investigation. The surrounding police are taking a visual approach to solving the crime, lamenting 'of course nobody's seen the head!' and 'I've never seen anything like it in all my goddam days!' (4-5).

Stephanie, however, is unable to bear witness to the crime by directly looking at the body, the decapitated corpse represents an act too horrific to do so. Thus, in order to

access the ‘deepest depths of horror’ that resulted in Gloria’s death, she advocates for hearing rather than seeing.<sup>68</sup>

Stephanie’s status as a listener informs her role as the novel’s quester in two ways. First and foremost, it allows her to bear witness by listening to the narrative being told by the body, a narrative that remains absent for the police officers who are primarily concerned with constructing a visual image of Gloria. Dori Laub is primarily concerned with the bearing of witness to ‘massive trauma’, that is, trauma that effects large groups of people, yet his understanding of the relation between listening and narrative still holds relevance to my reading of Stephanie as a detective who bears witness through listening. ‘The victim’s narrative’, he states, the ‘process of bearing witness to massive trauma’ begins ‘with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the overwhelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence’ (57). ‘The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the “knowing” of the event is given birth to’ (57). Thereby the listener, in bearing witness to trauma, becomes ‘the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time’ as well as ‘a participant and a co-owner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself’ (57). ‘The listener has to feel the victim’s victories, defeats and silences, know them from within, so that they can assume the form of testimony’ (58). This is in concordance with the way Stephanie goes about investigating Gloria’s murder, seeking to bring the event into existence by knowing it through the process of listening. In doing so she becomes a co-owner of the trauma, something that I explore in greater detail in the next section. In this case, listening is the only way to bear witness to Gloria, addressing the absence that is the trauma of her murder. A second way that Stephanie’s use of listening is essential to her role as a quester is that by refusing to turn Gloria into an image she is also refusing to submit

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<sup>68</sup> In *Powers of Horror* (1980), Kristeva contemplates the image of the corpse in terms of her theory of the abject: ‘The corpse, seen without God and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. It is death infecting life. It is something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object. Imaginary uncanniness and real threat, it beckons to us and ends up engulfing us. It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules.’ For an analysis of Kristeva’s treatment of the abject in *Possessions* see Lydia Stone’s ‘Julia Kristeva’s “Mystery” of the Subject in Process’ (2004).

Gloria to the male gaze, a practice with a long past in the detective quest tradition. Laura Mulvey's seminal essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' coins the term male gaze and states that in 'a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly' (808). The depicted women are thereby forced to assume the role in which they 'are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*' (809). The examination of the crime scene forces Gloria into this role as the text lingers over her features:

'the strong fingers, the shapely gymnast thighs, the slim ankles, and above all the arrogant breasts that she had flaunted so openly, even if they had started to sag these last few years ... And that unmistakable bosom was encased, perfectly as usual, in the bodice of an ivory satin evening dress, on the left of which spread a crimson stain. (3)

Gloria is rendered 'easily recognisable' through this sexually-connoted process, for even when missing the crucial identifying feature that is one's head, her body remains 'evidence enough that it was she' (3). Beth Ann Bassein comments on a similar tendency in Edgar Allan Poe's depiction of the dead female body, arguing that due to Poe's 'skills as a poet and fiction writer, his theories regarding art, beauty, and pain, and the enthusiasm of his audience', a particular view of women has been perpetuated that 'identifies her with the most passive state occurring, that of the dead, and thus creates negative conditioning for generation after generation of vulnerable readers' (44). This is not solely limited to literary depictions yet appears in a variety of renditions from art to films to, more recently, advertising. In an exploration of this tendency in fashion photography, Rosetta Brookes locates the appeal of the recurring image of the 'passive reclining woman' in that she 'offers no threat; she is completely malleable, a dummy made of flesh' (19). 'The object of gratuitous sexual violence and violation, she offers no resistance, but because of this she becomes unreal, like de Sade's libertines' (19). 'As the threat of personality diminishes' Brooks continues, 'her image-like quality transports her beyond the eroticism of the living to the festhisation of the inanimate object. She fits into dominant stereotypes so completely that she ceases to connote any reality apart

from the images which constitute her' (19). By taking a solely visual approach to examining the body, the surrounding police's subjection of the female body to the male gaze, carries with it such implications which are, in turn, adopted and proliferated among the Santavarvaran people. Gloria is rendered 'completely malleable' and 'unreal' by this process, yet it is not only the police but also the people and press of Santavarvara who impose on her their own fetishised and stereotypic image. She is unable to offer any resistance to this, the threat of her personality having been diminished through this process, and, rendered voiceless, is also unable to counteract an unreal image with the truth.

In the face of this image Stephanie, however, still continues in her quest to hear and represent this narrative, adopting an approach to investigating Gloria's murder that I identify as grounded in the emotional. John G. Cawelti comments on how the portrayal of the victim is often an issue for detective writers, arguing that if 'the reader is given too much information about the victim or if he seems a character of great importance, the story's focus around the process of investigation will be blurred' (91). Furthermore, the text's 'emotional effect will move towards tragedy or pathos, disrupting the relative serenity and detachment of the classical detective formula' (91). Yet, in *Possessions*, I argue, Kristeva engages in this process deliberately. Through Stephanie, the reader is given more information about Gloria than any other character, whereby the investigative process is blurred; and she is also unable to emotionally detach herself, becoming consumed with the tragedy that was Gloria's life and death. When contrasted against the emotional detachment of the other detectives, Stephanie's emotional investment in Gloria is reminiscent of the dichotomy emotionality and rationality that Alison Jaggar discusses in her influential article 'Love and knowledge: Emotion in feminist epistemology'. She cites the rise of modern science in the seventeenth century as 'redefining reason as a purely instrumental faculty' which 'required a corresponding reconceptualization of emotion' (152). 'This was achieved', she elaborates, 'by portraying emotions as nonrational and often irrational urges that regularly swept the body, rather as a storm sweeps over the land' (152). Traditionally rationality 'has been associated with the mental, the cultural, the universal, the public, and the male, whereas emotion has been associated with the irrational, the natural, the particular, the private,

and, of course, the female' (151). She points out that 'reason has been most associated with members of dominant political, social, and cultural groups and emotion with members of subordinate groups', predominately people of colour and women (163). Thereby 'the ideal of the dispassionate investigator is a classist, racist, and especially masculinist myth' functions 'to bolster the epistemic authority of currently dominant groups, composed largely of white men, and to discredit the observations and claims of the currently subordinate groups including, of course, the observations and claims of many people of colour and women' (165-6). Stephanie passes through a range of emotions in the presence of Gloria's body, from hatred of her killer, to an attempt at ironic detachment, to anger at the other detectives for their own indifference. She speaks of the hatred she feels towards the murderer, '[d]id I hate the monster who'd killed Gloria? Of course. What other answer could there be to the appalling question posed by that act' (10). Yet this hatred is not an emotion that maintains a hold on her for long but rather is overcome rapidly, transforming into a sort of sardonic laughter. 'Hatred', she explains, 'works in silence or expresses itself in short, breathless sentences: slang and a line of dots. I knew all about it; I'd experienced it, I felt it so much I'd liked to be nothing but hate' (11). In Stephanie, however, hatred 'was only partial. In me it was mingled with an inexplicable tolerance that loosened hatred's grip and made my loathing veer toward sardonic laughter' (11). The idea of hatred working in silence is one which this chapter will later explore in more depth through its analysis of Pauline Gadeau, who expresses her hatred of Gloria through her silence. In contrast, Stephanie does not allow hatred to maintain its grip on her, rather it fades and transforms into ironic detachment. She continues to identify this ironic sensibility as the tone often used in detective novels,

Like such writers I too indulged in hatred, only under cover of the mockery supposed to be appropriate to minor accidents and petty crime as well as to hatred and to those, including myself, who harbor it. This ambiguous and, I assure you, unconscious attitude unfortunately watered down my physical perception of Gloria's murder and turned it into a party piece for which I was the only audience. (11)

Here the distant and ironic tone assumed by detective novels works to undermine the brutality of the murder. The narrator does not get overwhelmed by emotion or hatred at the murder but rather distances itself from the loss of human life with irony and mockery. Stephanie attempts to maintain this logic, claiming that such distance allows for a more objective and clear reading of the facts, having ‘had the great advantage of placing [her] at a distance from what had happened and enabling [her] to see it more clearly’ (11). While hatred is momentarily ‘satisfactory’ it is also ‘bound to blind you to some extent; only irony may occasionally lead to something worthwhile’ (11). This first scene is cut short by Stephanie who, unable to remain in the presence of the emotionally distant detectives, removes herself from the area:

Enough! I had to get out of there. A dozen or so detectives were lifting fingerprints and collecting every hair they could find that was anywhere near the murdered woman; they couldn’t have cared less about my conjectures as to Gloria Harrison’s misfortunes. Any more than they cared for my troubles, for that matter. That only made them fit more naturally into the general picture. They too were indifferent, unfeeling, becoming stiff and theatrical. Extreme brutality made people unreal. (11)

It is the ironic detachment typical to the detective quest that renders them indifferent, unfeeling, and unreal, rather than objective and capable of producing results. Stephanie differentiates herself from that traditional detective, cold and unattached yet obsessed with revealing the killer. Again, this sense of irony and detachment exhibits itself through the construction of a ‘general picture’ in stark contrast to the narrative that Stephanie is trying to listen to. Stephanie’s role as a quester thereby informs what I identify as the failure of the novel, the problematics inherent to and impossibility of representing a narrative of female experience to an audience that are ultimately hostile to hearing it.

#### **4.2 Stephanie’s motivation to quest**

In the previous section, I argued that Stephanie was an emotional quester who bears witness through listening to a narrative. I shall now discuss the ways in which this informs her motivation to quest, how Stephanie’s identity as a listener is also connected



to that of a speaker, and how her desire to narrate a story about Gloria's life overcomes her task as a detective, that of investigating her death. A significant contributor to this desire is her emotional identification with Gloria which makes it so that her attempt to narrate her is simultaneously an attempt to narrate herself. Slavoj Žižek argues in *Looking Awry* that the narrative form of the hard-boiled detective novel necessitates the separation of a Watson-like figure from the actual detective (62). This allows for the companion to be in a position to facilitate narration of the deduction and solving of the crime by assuring that the detective's reasoning is spelled out for both the reader and the community in which the murder has taken place. Stephanie, however, regards herself as both the detective and Watsonian companion in this investigation. This is partly due to the fact that she is a journalist who assumes the role of detective to solve Gloria's murder; she describes herself as a 'lonely hunter, a traveller, a journalist', with the latter instilling in her an awareness of the significance of discovering the truth and constructing a narrative that facilitates its revelation (11). As I argue in this section, the creation of such a narrative of Gloria's past and identity becomes inseparable from, and often supersedes, that of the usual detective quest motive to find the killer. It is particularly of note to examine Stephanie's reasons for undertaking the quest as she is not involved in investigating the murder in any official capacity. At most she is a witness, having attended a dinner party thrown by Gloria the previous evening, and only avoids being considered a suspect due to her friendship with Police Captain Rilsky. Yet the narrating of Gloria's life and character rather than her death ultimately becomes inseparable from the investigation to find her murderer. That Stephanie is trying to compile a narrative of Gloria's life is significant considering the connection between psychoanalytic practice and the act of narrating, with various psychoanalysts conceiving of their work in terms of listening to a patient's life and constructing a narrative, a method invariably informed by listening and speaking. Donald Spence in his seminal 1984 text *Narrative Truth and Historical Truth* argued that everything depends on 'making sense of a chaotic life' in that the analyst's task is to turn 'symptoms, fantasies, and other seemingly random aspects of the patient's behavior into a story with a central theme, a recognizable structure, and an overall sense of coherence' (71). This idea is reinforced by Roy Schafer who later argued in *Retelling a Life* that 'each analysis

amounts in the end to retelling a life in the past and present – and as it may be in the future. A life is re-authored as it is co-authored' (xv). This idea of organising a subject's chaotic life into a coherent narrative through the act of listening is one which Kristeva engages with in the novel, and as I argue, becomes the central motivation of Stephanie's quest.

A fellow journalist involved with the case, Larry Smirnoff, defines the appeal of crimes and detective novels as that 'the essential has taken place, but it appears that the essential is not there; the death has been filmed, okay, but other films are possible' (144). 'And at that point', he continues, 'everything breaks again: the enquiry and therefore the novel. Is there ever an end to the story?' (144) Stephanie agrees with him, noting that '[e]verything had already taken place. There remained to find out what, who, when, why. Isn't that why we invent stories in the imperfect? ... Only one story will be the true one. It will not always be known' (145). Thus, Stephanie begins to construct her own story of Gloria, comprised of information she often comes across accidentally or by chance:

With the help of such encounters, accidental or inevitable, Stephanie's investigation was making progress. Adding note after note, without really going out of her way, she was building up a file of her own on the Gloria case. As detective work it was necessarily irrelevant: what could they add up, details like this, trivialities about a woman's life recounted by a knitter, whether pink, blue, or green? Never mind, it was up to Rilsky to be efficient, though that wasn't the poor fellow's strong point. But since it amused him ...! Meanwhile Stephanie plugged away at a vague and uncertain reconstruction of the victim's life and character. (123)

Stephanie's framing of her investigation here is extremely significant. Firstly, she does not consider herself an active detective but rather builds her case accidentally or inevitably. Secondly, she dismisses her efforts as irrelevant, trivial, and inefficient in contrast to the expected efficiency of the official investigation. Thirdly, that she is not investigating Gloria's death, as one would assume a detective would, but rather reconstructing her 'life and character'. Stephanie builds up her investigation despite acknowledging that it is irrelevant and inefficient in comparison to the official case, still

feeling the need to reconstruct Gloria's life and character, a need that supersedes even that to find her killer. This is a need that, I argue, following my characterisation of Stephanie as an emotional detective, is primarily informed by her personal identification with Gloria. She is in her own words 'an oversensitive reporter who took other people's troubles too much to heart, especially when they were women', and it is this connection that she feels with Gloria that leads her to undertake the quest, to try to 'usurp the already suspect role of a detective on a godforsaken place like Santa Varvara' (59). Indeed, Stephanie spends the majority of the novel narrating Gloria's past and character rather than solving the mystery of her murder. She attempts to form as complete a story of Gloria as possible through relating her work as a translator, her marriage to a distant and uncaring artist Stan Kovak, her affair with Michael Fish, a money-grubbing corrupt businessman with ties to the mafia, and finally her relationship with her son Jerry and his speech therapist Pauline. Highly conscious of the similarities between herself and Gloria, she constantly compares their troubles. As Carol Mastrangelo Bové notes, it is the qualities that both women share – their successful careers, their foreignness, and their ability to exhibit intense feelings of passion and love, whether it be romantic or maternal – that Gloria is hated by the Santavarvarians, something which Stephanie keenly resents (130). The connection between the two makes it so that in defending Gloria against other people's perception of her, Stephanie is also defending her own life and identity (130). Davis also says of this narrative that Stephanie 'has constructed it, it is not a simple reflection of events as they occurred, but perhaps also it is her own story she is telling, the story of her own desire and of her own implication in the crime' (147). Stephanie lays claim to the narrative she is constructing of Gloria, making it evident why the quest is not irrelevant or trivial to her. In her attempt at a narration that does not misrepresent or stereotype Gloria, she is also defending herself and her own story. Her eventual failure to tell the narrative she has constructed, and leaving the Santavarvarians with the incomplete image they have created of Gloria, thereby resonates further to also encompass Stephanie herself.

### 4.3 Encounters in Santa Varvara

The characters are seemingly aware that they are going through the motions of a detective novel, and often make references to the tropes and clichés common to such stories. Stephanie repeatedly calls herself a detective and amusedly points out times when the police behave according to the genre; for example, she describes how ‘Rilsky’s assistant followed him like a shadow, as in every self-respecting detective story’ and later tells Rilsky that he ‘ought to write detective stories ... But I’m afraid they might be rather unsophisticated, at least for my taste’ (39, 157). Indeed, the novel is populated by stock detective novel characters, such as the blundering chief of police, the resentful house servant, and the tragic wealthy woman whose death instigates the investigation. After characters speak, their names and manner of doing so are often included in brackets, as if mimicking a film or television script, giving the impression that the plot and characters have already been mapped out, and only require actors to fill the role. Even the serial killers’ Jason X. and Tyson Y. surnames reflect this preoccupation. Reminiscent of the mathematical equations which involve having to identify X and Y, they imply that these parts could be filled by interchangeable characters. These self-aware references function to reinforce the importance of narration in the novel, as I will discuss in this section, specifically how Stephanie and the characters she encounters are all trying to construct and tell their own story about Gloria. Despite opening the novel and remaining a source of horror and incomprehension through the novel, the decapitation remains unsolved with the official investigation having been closed after the arrest of Tyson Y., and the culprit remaining at large. Indeed, Gloria’s head is never actually found, having been cruelly thrown in the garbage by Pauline. The fact that Stephanie’s quest to construct Gloria’s story hinges on her choosing whether to tell the final truth is all the more significant since all the main characters in the novel are also depicted in terms of speaking and remaining silent. In fact, Kristeva describes all the relationships between the characters Stephanie encounters in terms of speaking, or sometimes more essentially, remaining silent, a significant factor of her quest since its successful completion depends on her not remaining silent. This section, I therefore explore how the act of speaking informs the characters of the quest as well as Gloria’s narrative.

Rilsky's assumption that he is in possession of the whole story is emphasised through his repeated use of the phrase 'needless to say', Gloria's fraught relationship with her son which ultimately leads to her decapitation is expressed in terms of translation, and finally, Pauline's hatred of Gloria is represented through silence. A primary example of the importance of speaking in the novel occurs during a conversation between Police Captain Rilsky, who is leading the investigation, and his second-in-command, Lieutenant Popov. In this exchange, Rilsky repeatedly uses his favourite phrase while Popov assures him that his observations are correct:

'Stabbed in the left breast. Sudden attack. Wound at widest point of impact.

Write everything down Popov, needless to say.' ...

'tell me later if I turn out to be wrong – I'm already as certain of their verdict as if I had the photos in front of me: an oval orifice between the ribs, near the sternum, made by a very sharp blade; considerable infiltration of blood.'

... And you'll move heaven and earth to find that very sharp blade. Needless to say.' (39-40)

Given Popov's reluctance to challenge any of his superior's claims and Rilsky's inability to listen to any criticism of his methods, the entreaty 'tell me later if I turn out to be wrong' is glaringly ironic. His approach, and by extension that of the official investigation, is again conceptualised through visual narration as Rilsky catalogues only what he can see in front of him and sees the outcome of the lab reports as if he had the photos in front of him. His invocation of the phrase 'needless to say' is evident of his perception of the case, that the events that lead to Gloria's murder are so obvious that they don't need to be said. He thereby disregards any alternative narrative, refusing to hear any story of the decapitation which could challenge the conclusions he has arrived at. His inability to hear the truth causes him to dismiss Stephanie's later doubts and prematurely declare the case closed without solving the final murder.

Gloria and Jerry's relationships is also defined in terms of speaking, specifically with Jerry learning how to speak and Gloria's attempts at dialogue between them. After experiencing a blissfully happy pregnancy, Gloria is told that Jerry 'couldn't hear, he would never be able to hear, and he wouldn't be able to speak either' (46). Following the revelation, she realises that 'he'd have to be taught everything', and that in order to

do so ‘it would be necessary to enter into his senses: his eyes, and what they saw, his lips and what they tasted, his nostrils and what they smelled’, in a fictional representation of a process theorised by Kristeva in an essay entitled ‘Motherhood Today’ (46). She describes how ‘the mother inhabits the mouth, lungs and digestive tube of her baby and by accompanying his echolalia, leads him towards signs, sentences, stories: hence *infans* becomes a child, a *speaking subject*’ (“Motherhood Today”).<sup>69</sup> The mother thus engages in a ‘cycle of sublimation’ in which she ‘does not invest her own message’ but allows her child to develop their own language and thought, which Kristeva describes as ‘the equivalent of choosing a different language than his mother’s, or even a foreign language’ (“Motherhood Today”). Amith Kumar P.V. expands on a similar process in *Bakhtin and Translation Studies* in his exploration of the application of Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of dialogism to translating across languages and cultures. ‘The task of the translator’, he argues, ‘involves their entering a dialogic space, where the target text emerges from dialogue with both source language/culture and target language/culture. To translate is to create a new utterance with many “microdialogues.”’ (106). Gloria views her relationship with Jerry and their attempts to communicate as a similar process, going as far as to regard it as an exercise in translation:

Then this shared universe would have to be named, and spoken language constructed as if it were a foreign tongue. Translated. But, after all, that was her profession, her vocation, her fate ... I play, you play; I translate, you learn; we play, you speak; it’s happened, it’s always happening; it will never happen, but it’s coming, better and better; you give me pleasure, it gives you pleasure; we’ll go on, we’ll never part; I’ll translate you till the end. You will endlessly translate. (46)

Gloria is attempting to create a ‘dialogic space’ in which she uses her learned skills as a translator to transform Jerry into a ‘speaking subject’. Yet Gloria isolates herself and her son in this attempt at communication, using her tools of translation to form a ‘shared universe’, solely created for and accessible by them, thereby significantly stunting her son’s development. Annjo Klungervik Grenall applies Bakhtin’s dialogism to child acquisition of language, describing how ‘when a child is born and is introduced into

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<sup>69</sup> See also Kristeva’s *Desire in Language* (1980).

language, he or she has to negotiate their way into a ready-made web of meanings which has been negotiated forth by their predecessors' (68). Essentially, however, 'the child soon becomes a co-actor in this development' and as they insert 'language into new contexts over and over again, the words and expressions used pick up new shades of meaning and shed old shades of meaning, or change their meaning completely' (68-9). While Jerry is able to absorb the information given to him by Gloria, he never displays this ability to learn and form new meanings, he 'never told his mother anything she hadn't already told him, anything she hadn't expected, foreseen, programmed. Every word, phrase, or story was merely a kind of prosthesis' (52-3). The fact that his speech rarely contained 'the surprises that give parents so much delight, the sudden flashes of brilliance that make mothers and fathers think their offspring will turn out to be geniuses' takes its toll on Gloria, which she in turn took out on him through bouts of affection and anger: 'Gloria swallowed her frustration over Jerry's unsatisfactory words and marvelled at how he'd learned to compensate for his lack of reasoning power by the extraordinary lucidity of his affection' (52-3). Their inability to understand and speak to each other, to establish a dialogue, leads to misunderstanding and resentment between them: "He thinks I think he doesn't suffer." "She thinks I'm just like everybody else." Perhaps both mother and son played at not understanding each other, and as a result Jerry gradually did come to be like everyone else. Almost' (50). The inability to bridge the gap thus creates tension between the two – 'lightning is usually accompanied by thunder' – Gloria's all-consuming love for Jerry is two-sided, on one side the happiness and devotion he inspired, and on the other hand, when he 'appeared particularly and impossibly dim, Gloria could be incredibly violent' (58). When confronted with the full brunt of this fury, 'Jerry just accepted the insults and blows – completely speechless, numb, guilty' (58). Jerry is rendered speechless and helpless in the face of Gloria's rage which expressed itself through shouting. Thereby every aspect of their fraught relationship is expressed in terms of speaking and, more importantly, the inability to speak. Gloria's distress at her son's disability causes her to devote her life to teaching him how to speak. She approaches this process with her tools of translation, creating a dialogic space that only they can be a part of. Yet the isolation engenders

miscommunication and resentment which is only exacerbated by their reactions to their frustration, Gloria with her violent shouting and Jerry terrified into silence.

Jerry thus turned to his speech therapist Pauline as a 'valued confidante', who provided 'a refuge where, like a beaten puppy, he could lick his wounds and wait for the next bout of devotion or ferocity' (58-59). In the face of her fraught relationship with her son, Gloria considers her hiring as 'a great stroke of luck', as Pauline enters their world along with 'her professional competence, her perfect but unobtrusive tact ... Pauline understood and faced up to things. This gave Jerry more space, and he used it to breathe more freely or, in pedagogical terms, to "make progress"' (50). Jerry's speech and ability to communicate only begins to improve once the dialogic space Gloria created for them widens in order to render him less isolated and provide a buffer from the devoted attention of his mother. Yet while Pauline's entrance into their world gives Jerry room to improve it also positions her as a silent witness to these loud rages and their effect on Jerry, with each occurrence increasing her hatred of Gloria. And until she performs the decapitation, her primary method of expressing her hatred is through silence: 'Pauline would smile good-naturedly and say nothing ... her job was to make others speak, not to speak herself, still less to speak about herself' (49). This sets her up in direct contrast with Gloria who expresses her emotions with loudness while Pauline does so with silence. Gloria defines her maternal love as a task to be accomplished, with the tools of translation at her disposal she could 'achieve the impossible' and cure his speech. In order to do so, however, she cuts herself off from her surroundings, allowing the task to become all-consuming, to possess her. Pauline recognises these actions as symptomatic of trauma, being herself 'in a good position to know this' having lost her brother years ago (49). She, however, expresses this with silence and professionalism, smiling 'good-naturedly' and saying nothing in response to Gloria's wish for assurance. She retreats into her profession in which she is tasked with helping her patients to speak, specifically Jerry, and not to 'speak herself' or, essentially, 'speak about herself'. Later Ritsky questions Pauline about the murder out of routine, so convinced of her innocence that in his view she 'scarcely qualified as a suspect' and therefore isn't surprised that her deposition 'didn't tell him much he didn't know already', ending the interview quickly as [h]er precise monotone voice and drab appearance were starting to make him yawn



(91). ‘Unfortunately the speech therapist hadn’t much to say’, he summarises, ‘She was very reserved, and her observations were all strictly professional. Jerry was her patient, so naturally she knew more about the deaf boy’s difficulties – largely surmounted – than about any secret suffering his handicap may have caused his mother’ (91). Again, Pauline is depicted in terms of her professionalism citing her job preventing her from speaking about Gloria, once more using her job as a speech therapist, and therefore someone dedicated to Jerry’s speech and not her own, in order to avoid speaking about Gloria’s secret suffering. Thereby both women lack an adequate method of expressing their emotions and growing resentment, with Gloria resorting to episodic rages that confuse and frighten her son, and Pauline retreating into silence and professionalism until she finally acts on her hatred.

#### **4.4 Santa Varvara as a space of failure**

Kristeva’s fictional city of Santa Varvara is a formerly communist Eastern European city which is besieged by crime and corruption following the fall of the Berlin Wall.<sup>70</sup> Stephanie is sent there twice through the course of the novel by the French newspaper she works for in order to investigate several reports of governmental wrongdoings, including the black-market sale of plutonium, human rights abuses, and drug trafficking. In her article ‘Women’s time’, Kristeva discusses the tendency of women in Eastern-European countries who, having gained success, ‘become the pillars of the existing governments, guardians of the status quo, the most zealous protectors of the established order’ (26). This phenomenon, she argues, leads to a broader ‘consolidation of conformism ... toward levelling, stabilization, conformism, at the cost of crushing expectations, experiments, chance occurrences’ (26-27). Ryan notes that Kristeva’s fictional city functions as a space in which such issues are contested, where she can interrogate and depict European and trans-European women, as a place which ‘combines the vestiges of communism with the beginnings of a new, liberal society’ with the novels suggesting ‘that the Eastern and Western worlds overlap in peculiar ways that

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<sup>70</sup> Ryan notes that Kristeva’s native country of ‘Bulgaria, is certainly one possible, but by no means exclusive model for this space’ (108). In the original French, the city is referred to as Santa Barbara which Davis points out ‘may recall, but should not entirely be identified with, the Californian city’ (299).

often resist common sense and rationality' (108). In order to explore how Santa Varvara functions as a space of failure, I shall discuss the several murders that are enacted upon Gloria. In doing so, I draw upon Goodman's analysis, who identifies in the novel 'a tripartite layering of the murder solution, where the fictional conventions at first close down the narrative interpretation that the crime demands, but then the fictional conventions themselves are disrupted, reopening alternative interpretive lines and alternative political forces' (73). In this section, however, my approach differs from Goodman's in that while she focuses on how the murders function to illustrate and resolve the tension between the symbolic and the semiotic, I discuss how each murder corresponds to a facet of Gloria's identity that provokes resentment and hatred from the Santavarvarans, with her strangulation reflecting on her sexuality and successful career and her stabbing in response to her foreignness.<sup>71</sup> The decapitation – which I will examine in the next section due to its heightened prominence in the novel, as by remaining unsolved it signals the failure of the quest – is when this hatred reaches its zenith as she is silenced and her head cruelly disposed of. Each murder, I argue, functions to render it impossible for Stephanie to succeed in relating a narrative of Gloria that is not incomplete or distorted, suppressing the truth and making her conform to the image they create of her rather than listening to her narrative. The three murders, thereby, constitute disparate aspects of Gloria that cohere in order to form the space of failure Stephanie is questing in.

In her perception of how Gloria was regarded by the Santa Varvarians, Stephanie is resentful of Gloria being made the subject of constant gossip and hatred, both during her life and death: 'Slander, treachery, and gossip were no news to me, and I knew they'd stopped surprising Gloria long ago' (12-13). She notes that 'Gloria's murder was turning into the "Harrison affair," and all Santa Varvara was busy with the subject. It – or rather the "inside story" – was the only subject of conversation' and that in narrating this story '[e]veryone had a theory, a certainty, an inner conviction, a secret to add to

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<sup>71</sup> Goodman further notes that the 'division-into-three of the narrative sequence' can also be seen as replicating 'the three generations of feminism outlined in "Women's Time," with one alternative dismissed as a relationship of identification and expression, a second dismissed as making demands on the state for public representation and equality. The selected third – the one of the progressive, feminist future – is beyond either identification or representation, an identity constantly separating from itself, both as "lethal" and "untenable"' (73).

what was still a very hazy picture' (121). Stephanie again expresses frustration at the multitudes of untrue stories circulating about Gloria in their being related visually, distorting and stereotyping in order to create a 'hazy picture' rather than listening to a complete narrative. Briefly after being confronted with her headless corpse, Stephanie reflects 'without undue indulgence but not without some pity, on what a mess Gloria's life had been. Like that of so many women, to put it mildly! Not to put it mildly would be another story' (12). She notes how Gloria had lived 'a visible life ... the kind that doesn't attract much sympathy in Santa Varvara – or anywhere else, for that matter' (13). 'I knew she was hated', she continues, 'a foreigner, almost a writer, and the heroine of some public success: she had distinguished herself as the translator of Faulkner into Santavarvaran and then fallen back on being the official translator of Philip Roth' (12-13). By pointing this out, as well as the similarities between herself and Gloria, Stephanie broadens the scope of her investigation to reflect not only on herself and Gloria, but on 'so many women'. The reasons set out for the public hatred of Gloria – the fact that she was a woman, her successful career, her foreignness, and above all her flaunting these qualities in public, her visibility – are thus not limited to herself and Gloria. By broadening this analysis, she includes not only Gloria but 'so many women', as well as herself, who deal with 'slander, treachery, and gossip' as part of living visible, messy lives. In this light, the excessive hatred directed Gloria's way is rendered unsurprising, and indeed expected.

The first murder solved by the police is that committed by Michael Fish, Gloria's lover and a corrupt businessman with ties to the mafia. Their relationship is a mutually destructive, one in which Gloria would give 'her lover the impression that he was merely a laborer in the matter of sex, never the master', and subsequently 'Michael either let himself go or got into a rage' (107). He is primarily interested in her wealth, while she attempts to pass him off as an art dealer in order to make him appear more cultured and therefore palatable to her friends. Indeed, it is her attempts to do so that result in him getting caught, as he takes a reproduction of *Woman with a Collar* that Jerry painted for Gloria, reasoning that the police would confuse the murder for a burglary and expect an art dealer to recognise a fake Picasso. Ironically it is his subsequent plan to sell the forgery that ties him to the scene of the crime. Gloria's

relationship with Fish is regarded, both by Stephanie and the Santavarvarans, as the latest in a series of dysfunctional, romantic entanglements, a continuous source of pity and gossip. Stephanie catalogues Gloria's transgressions in a list that is supplemented by Rilsky's comments, citing her 'mistakes [as] common knowledge, even though attempts had been made to cover them up' (38). First, Gloria's 'absurd marriage to Stanislas Novak, "the local artistic genius, the Leonado da Vinci and Don Juan of Santa Varvara" (Rilsky). Then there was Jerry, the shock of his birth "or rather the trauma, the devotion, the passion" (Rilsky again)' (38). And her last mistake, "'the ridiculous Michael Fish" (Rilsky, as always). Gloria would never be able to pass Fish off as a connoisseur, ... a mere art dealer, however sexy, who on top of everything else was a native of Santa Varvara' (38). 'In short', Stephanie concludes, 'the whole story was either vulgar or tragic according to your point of view' (38). Here Stephanie's cataloguing of Gloria's mistakes, supplemented by Rilsky's comments, concludes that depending on one's point of view this summation of her life story was 'either vulgar or tragic'. Yet she continues that 'it did nothing to explain Gloria's murder. Still less the savagery with which one or more people had mutilated her corpse' (38). The people of Santa Varvara, keen to pass judgement on the vulgarity or tragedy of Gloria's life and untimely death, attempting to reduce her to her various 'mistakes', do so without an actual awareness of the whole story, missing the final explanation behind the decapitation. Her first murder at the hands of Michael Fish is therefore reduced to the culmination of a turbulent and violent relationship, in which 'a woman who enjoys sex has made up her mind to die' (108). While preoccupied with Jerry and withdrawn from the outside world 'local attitudes changed' and the 'exaggerated admiration of professional women was superseded by the old affectation of gallantry towards the fair sex' (124). Thus, an affected version of feminine desire proliferates in Santa Varvara including 'unnecessary adorations, proud escapes, anguished partings, and pointless though unconditional reconciliations' coupled with 'hard sex and stiff upper lips and lastly the words of the gentlemen themselves, apparently as madly in love' (125). With this form of feminine desire heralded as authentic and revolutionary in Santa Varvara, the gulf between Gloria and Santavaravarans grows wider. Gloria, not exhibiting the kind of sexual love that was being promoted in confessional books and magazine articles, began to be regarded as 'a

cerebral type, cold and full of her own success, an arrogant go-getter' (123). The resentment became more keenly felt until no 'woman – in other words, no one at all – had anything to say to the wealthy heiress obsessed with her translations and her avant-garde painter' (123). It is when Gloria does not conform to the Santavarvaran's idea of femininity that they reject her, a rejection that again takes the form of silence, with them not having anything to say to her. Kristeva thereby connects the hatred felt by the Santavarvarians to that expressed by Pauline, both take the form of silence.

However, following Michael Fish's confession to the strangulation it becomes clear that 'if Fish really had strangled Gloria, then someone else must have been responsible for the beheading and perhaps the stabbing too. So the theory of a serial killer now came into its own. Rilsky had already accepted it, anyway' (141). This marks the point when his investigation turns to the two serial killers Jason X. and Tyson Y., who had recently escaped from St. Ambrose mental institution. Jason X. is cleared of the crime since at the time of Gloria murder 'he was cutting some other unfortunate woman's throat' (186). Tyson Y. is subsequently convicted of both the stabbing and the decapitation, despite the two crimes having been committed at least twelve hours apart. Rilsky declares the case closed and dismisses Stephanie's doubts on the timings of the murders. Santa Varvara's entrance into the global economy following the fall of the Soviet Union resulted in the cutting of publicly funded institutions such as hospitals and psychiatric hospitals in favour of the city's growing tourism industry. This led to the premature release of mental patients before their treatment was complete, one of whom was responsible for stabbing Gloria, the second murder. Lieutenant Popov decries the situation to Police Captain Rilsky, exclaiming '[t]hey're all guilty boss, if you ask me ... The politicians and the psychiatrists: the politicians because they cut the funding of public institutions and dispossess the poor, and the shrinks because they have too many ideas!' (145) Stephanie reluctantly agrees that '[t]reatment wasn't always all it might be, what with staff shortages, overcrowding and inadequate management' (148). During her visit to St. Ambrose, she imagines that among the inmates 'prowled a future Jason X.', a killer produced 'by a negligent education system, rising inflation, an underfunded national health service, suburban violence, and a general decline in civic consciousness', before glibly stating that she now 'had the subject – a highly political one – of my article

for *Events* in Paris' (150). Gloria's second murder, as Goodman states, shows her 'as a victim of a transfer of public functions into private hands brought about in the globalization of the local economy' (74). In stoking the public's fascination with stories about deranged serial killers, the stabbing becomes an embodiment of the political problems of the city, a barbaric result of prejudice and corruption.

The violence as produced by the political is inherent in the name Kristeva gives to her fiction city Santa Varvara, or Santa Barbara in the original French. Davis states of the name Kristeva gives to the city, '[b]arbarians are the strangers or outsiders who speak nonsense, they are alien to the logos which is both the language of the Greeks and the intelligible order of the world' (114). The city therefore is both 'sacred (Santa) and senseless (Barbara), a site of inviolable otherness not susceptible to reason's scrutiny' (144-5). Yet Kristeva is also accessing a long tradition of the intertwining of barbarism and foreignness. Indeed, in their hatred of foreigners, particularly foreign women, the city of Santa Varvara is rendered barbaric. While Gloria's stabbing is not a politically motivated act on the part of Jason X., the barbarism of the murder itself is inherently political, framed as a result of neoliberal policies. As Trigo points out, *Possessions* is 'inflected by contemporary history and politics, even as the novel interrogates the sources of both. Kristeva writes the novel during a decade of consolidation by the extreme right in France' (7). Jean le Pen, whose National Front party had been making electoral gains in the previous decade, set a new record for the far right during the 1995 presidential election. J.G. Shields describes this election as one highly concerned with unemployment, and the associated issues of social deprivation and exclusion (251). Le Pen addressed this with a manifesto promising the creation 'of four million jobs over the seven-year presidential mandate, to repatriate three million immigrants, to ensure priority for French nationals over foreigners in employment, housing, social welfare and education, and to protect French jobs and products against international competition' (251). In an interview with Kristeva, conducted just before the French publication of *Possessions*, she exhibits concern about this phenomenon, stressing the 'increased hostility' (173) and the need for a 'good image of the nation that will not degenerate into Le Pen and the National Front' (176). This concern is realised in both Stephanie and Gloria who are constantly reminded of their foreignness, keenly aware how it can

engender resentment and even hatred: “‘She’s not one of us, she really isn’t,” people said. To the Santavarvarians, who like everyone else did all they could to be “one of us,” the duplicity they thought they saw in Gloria must have been insufferable’ (210). Stephanie wonders if Gloria’s is ‘the normal fate of a female foreigner’ (210). Rilsky declares Gloria’s murder as ‘a collective and thus a fundamentally pathological act’ yet stops himself short of considering the implications of this statement. He was ‘well aware of the serial killer’s existence, but he also knew that line of inquiry might lead to the real estate scandals. So perhaps for that reason, he decided to ignore institutional and political maladies’ (89). The official line of investigation refuses to broach the murder as an act of political violence inflicted on Gloria for the transgression of being a foreign woman and for visibly living a chaotic life. By prematurely declaring the case closed after these two murders, the police and press are able to construct a narrative about Gloria involving dysfunctional sexual relationships and a deranged serial killer on the loose. Her death becomes a means through which the public can become titillated and scandalised by her sexual affairs, revel in the death of an aloof woman with a successful career, and exploit the fascination attracted by serial-killers. The official investigation and the people of Santa Varvara therefore continue to propagate stories that are based on a ‘hazy image’ of Gloria constructed from barbaric hatred rather than listening to a complete narrative.

## **2.5 The Failure of Stephanie’s quest**

While Gloria is the victim of three murders in the course of one night, in this section I identify the third and final murder as the most important to solve for three reasons. This is due to, firstly, the perception of decapitation as a more horrific crime than strangulation or stabbing; secondly, the methodical and emotionless way Pauline carries out the crime; and lastly, that it alone remains unsolved and thereby indicates the failure of Stephanie’s quest. In an attempt to decipher why decapitations provoke such horror, Regina Janes argues that they represent an unnatural practise separate from other methods of violence. ‘There is nothing natural about decapitation’, she argues, ‘The deliberate separation of a head from its body is exclusively cultural. Not only is decapitation exclusively cultural, but it is also the first sign of the symbolic processes

that mark our species as distinctively human' (2). It shares certain similarities with other acts of violence in that it is 'sometimes promoted, sometimes disallowed, always subject to social control, yet also always eluding it, and then designated crime' (2).

Decapitations differ, however, in that they are only committed by human beings as a deliberate action, whereas in nature they can be by-products or accidental (2). Since decapitations in nature occur accidentally or as a by-product of another function, the act of deliberate decapitation as its own result becomes an exclusively human act.

Furthermore, she makes the point that the act of decapitation is often a difficult one that requires both skill and effort, despite serving 'no culinary, reproductive, or defensive purpose' (3). It therefore stands to reason that the fact that human beings undertake such an act which has no reason other than itself shows the head 'possess an already developed and elaborated system of meanings that can be appropriated with the head when the head is appropriated' (3). 'Symbolization begins', Janes states, 'or, more precisely, appears in that gap between use and actions, where we propose a difference between utility and activity' (3-4). The symbolism behind the decapitation is in fact what Stephanie is initially concerned with. 'Why that butchery, that pointless ferocity?', she asks, 'That was where the mystery lay, at least as far as I, Stephanie Delacour, was concerned' (13). From the beginning of the novel, therefore, she already singles out the decapitation as inherently more important to solve than the other murders.

If, therefore, Gloria's decapitation is a symbolic act, more so than Michael Fish's strangulation or Tyson Y.'s stabbing by virtue of it being a decapitation, I will begin this section by examining what it is symbolic of and subsequently what implications that has for the failure of the quest. Pauline's act of violence is described thusly:

I cut myself off from her, sever myself from the mother who drowns her son, detach myself from the corpse that I was but am no longer. I amputate her power, remove her distinguishing marks. She'll be stupidly, cruelly bereft of both her observation post and her crowning glory, poor old Gloria. Her supreme ornament will end up in the garbage, in a plastic trash can on the freeway, even her son wouldn't recognize her remains. Are you really yourself when you haven't got a head? A headless body has nothing, it has no self anymore so it



can't own anything, it knows neither mine nor thine. Not hers. Her what? Her son, your son, my son? Aimeric, Jerry? (202)

The symbolism Pauline is engaging with through beheading is three-fold, representing her replacement of Gloria as Jerry's primary care-giver, the cold detachment of her amputation, and her cruel humiliation of Gloria by discarding her head. Goodman interprets this act by drawing on Kristeva's theory of the semiotic and the symbolic, emphasising Gloria's usurpation from her role as Jerry's mother specifically by a hired speech therapist. She argues that the conflict between the semiotic and symbolic is thus resolved through the commodifying of the mother's role in language socialisation through paid help. 'Gloria's beheading', she argues, 'makes visible the expansion of foreign and private controls of economic culture, that is, the taking over of local lifeforms by market forces' (82). While I agree that this is a relevant aspect of the third murder, in my reading I focus on how the murder as Pauline's expression of the hatred she has for Gloria takes the form of cold detachment and silent professionalism, thereby placing her in direct contrast to the approach Stephanie takes in her quest. Stephanie begins the novel by distancing herself from the ironic detachment of the male police officers by taking an emotional approach, compiling an investigation of Gloria's life rather than her death. In doing so, as I have emphasised in earlier sections, she seeks to bear witness to her friend through the act of listening and speaking, compiling a narrative that can be heard rather than seen. I argue it is therefore significant that Pauline's hatred of Gloria, a hatred primarily defined through silence, is visibly expressed through an act she carries out with professional detachment that ultimately functions to remove the victim's ability to communicate. While the strangulation and stabbing are the results of an act of passion and a serial killer respectively, Pauline's murder of Gloria is conducted methodically. As Stephanie questions, 'what dark passion, coursing through the veins of what psychopath, could have guided the hand' that decapitated Gloria, she emphasises the precision of the act, the 'delicate skill' that cut away 'the flesh of the neck, the larynx, and the spine and left the smooth wide stream, the red mirror, the dreadful crimson edge outlining the corpse where the head should have been' (13). The brutality of the act is mediated by the methodical way it is carried out. The head is 'cut away' with 'delicate skill', leaving behind edges as smooth

as a mirror. Later Pauline narrates how she used a scalpel to ‘make the incision’, ‘the flesh, the vertebrae are parted by its precision’ (202). The action itself, like Pauline is reserved and professional, a calm mask hiding her hatred of Gloria. With her professional decapitation the ferocity of the act is jarringly juxtaposed with the lack of emotion displayed while it occurs. This lack of emotion is contrasted against Stephanie and Gloria, the other two female characters to which the reader is granted interiority. Unlike Stephanie who repeatedly describes herself in terms of her sensitivity and emotionality and Gloria who is often described in terms of her fraught emotional relationships to others, Pauline remains professional and calm even when exhibiting an act of ‘dark passion’ and hatred.

Pauline’s expertise with a scalpel is explained due to her former training as a surgeon, which she ceased due to a mental breakdown following the accidental drowning of her little brother Aimeric. This loss causes her attachment to Jerry as a substitute and therefore hatred of Gloria motivates her desire to replace her as his primary caretaker. Constantly resentful of Gloria’s neglect and ill-treatment of Jerry, she reaches her limit after overhearing Gloria’s promise to Michael Fish to alter her will in order to prioritise him over her son. Pauline’s earlier question of whether one still retains their identity once having been deprived of one’s head and therefore one’s ability to convey emotion is also pondered by Stephanie upon viewing her friend’s decapitated corpse. Gloria’s murder is made all the more barbaric, her body made ‘heavier’, by the loss of her head:

Nothing is heavier than a dead body. And it weighs even more when the head’s missing. A face – whether peaceful, purple, or distorted by death – gives meaning to a corpse and so makes it lighter. Eyes, even if they’re dull, staring, or protruding; lips, even if they’re twisted, bloodstained, or swollen; hair, even if it’s torn out, plastered down, or dishevelled – all necessarily convey what we suppose to be the expression of death. But without eyes or mouth, head or hair, a corpse is no more than a hunk of butcher’s meat. Its once erotic contours, pinned down implacably by gravity and lacking the only means that could have given acephalic distress a voice, are reduced to mere pragmatic pointlessness. Deprived of a death mask’s baleful exuberance, the dead are dead twice over. (4)

Kristeva describes Gloria as having been rendered ‘dead twice over’ due to being ‘[d]eprived of a death mask’s baleful exuberance’. In *The Severed Head*, she elaborates on the significance of the death mask, an item traditionally created after death by forming an impression of the subject’s face shortly after death. The purpose of doing so was to capture that allusive moment when a person was between life and death. Kristeva argues that this form of representation necessitates envisioning its decapitation, thereby making a direct connection between headlessness and masks: ‘Have you noticed how a mask, a false face, terrifies young children, even when its features are laughing? No doubt that’s because decapitation is intrinsically implied’ (*Severed Head* 106). This connection that Kristeva invokes between being rendered headless and wearing a mask is particularly of note as Gloria’s missing death mask is only one in a set of recurring images of masks and unmasking that are depicted in *Possessions*. Gloria herself is described as ‘a mask worn over a wound’ (123). Both Stephanie and Rilsky muse upon the tendency of people to mask their true selves and emotions, with the former stating ‘Santavarvaran might turn out to be only a mask for me; so many people do wear false beards, artificial breasts, false selves’ (20), and the latter’s resigned acceptance of everybody adopting ‘attitudes, poses, masks, “looks” of all kinds in the world of pretense where “truth” dissolves into the confusion of remote-control images, where “integrity” is a claim that can be undermined in an instant by financial speculation or legal skulduggery’ (72). The wearing of masks is depicted as intrinsic to life in Santa Varvara, the act of rendering oneself opaque by hiding one’s true intentions or emotion. Indeed, much of the novel and Stephanie’s quest is dedicated to untangling Gloria’s complex personal life and making sense of the trauma that is being masked. Through the decapitation, Gloria has been deprived of both her face and her mask. And the final example of unmasking is one which fails to occur, that is, Pauline’s unmasking as the final murderer. Detective stories generally make much of the moment in which the killer is finally unmasked, thereby signalling the end of the quest and return to order. This, significantly, does not occur in *Possessions*. Pauline has robbed Gloria of her death mask and is herself allowed to remain masked. When looking at her friend’s body, Stephanie is struck by how essential the head and face are in conveying expression and emotion. Even when the features have been distorted by death, she argues, they still

retain this capability. Again, the head finds its meaning in the symbolic as its removal dehumanises the body, reducing Gloria to a ‘hunk of butcher’s meat’. It is not only Gloria’s death that renders her voiceless, but the actual decapitation that removed the only way that she could have voiced her emotion at the act, to give her ‘acephalic distress a voice’. Pauline’s emotionless silencing of Gloria thereby informs Stephanie’s entire quest, in her attempt to bear witness for her friend after she had been rendered voiceless.

Yet this is a quest that ultimately fails, with the final murder remaining unsolved by Rilsky’s official investigation and the truth being hidden by Stephanie. Rilsky emphatically declares the case closed after solving the first two murders when Stephanie presses him about the decapitation:

“... Fish and Brian rot in prison and the Harrison business seems finally settled ...” [...]

“... Yes, the case *is* closed.” (Rilsky and Stephanie look each other in the eye).

“Tyson Thingamabob, or whatever his name is – the serial killer – can’t have been responsible for the beheading.” (Stephanie, poker-faced.)

“....” (Rilsky, equally impassive). (186)

Like Pauline’s hatred, Rilsky’s inability to listen to or consider an alternative narrative is related in terms of his silence signalled by ellipses and lack of emotion in his impassive expression. Rilsky ensures that the narrative that proliferates about Gloria will remain an incomplete and distorted image, ‘[f]rom all these puzzles, the Commissioner had chosen the one that was the most spectacular and the least harmful’ (192). He closes the case on a narrative that appeals to the Santavarvarans yet simultaneously does not lead them to question their assumptions regarding the woman who was a prominent subject of their gossip and slander. As Davis states, Rilsky’s ‘error is not that he weaves a story out of the material at his disposal, but that he halts the story too rapidly’ (146). ‘The story he settles for’, he continues, ‘involving a tragic mother, a crooked lover and a serial killer is, for all its narrative contortions, too stereotyped to match the complexity of the real. The final story may never be told, indeed it may be untellable’ (146). In this last section, however, I explore how Stephanie also becomes complicit in this failure as she ultimately decides not to reveal the truth about the decapitation. The end of the novel

further reinforces the importance of listening and speaking in bearing witness, with Stephanie's career as a journalist giving her particular insight: 'After ten years of journalism, interviewing, and reporting, Stephanie had come to understand ... the secret that underlies all dialogue' (169). 'What are people after when they talk to you?' she questions, and concludes,

An audience, so they can go on talking as if that audience didn't exist. Or rather as if the public – you and I – were only there to provide the approval for themselves. Not enough of it, at any rate. Tell me that what I'm saying is really what I'm saying, and tell me it's okay. I'm not asking you to say what you think of what I say; don't even imagine I'm asking you to say anything at all. I'm merely asking the impossible: that you should bear witness to my being, and to my being okay. I speak, you listen, therefore I am. Listen to me in order that I may exist. (169)

Stephanie here invokes Descartes's 'I think therefore I am', whose mediations conclude 'that the proposition, "I am," "I exist," is necessarily true whenever it is put forward by me or conceived in my mind' (19). Contrastingly she argues that it is not the act of thinking that confirms proof of existence but rather that of speaking and being heard. Thereby Gloria being robbed of her head and ability to speak results in the loss of the ability to be. Her murder increasingly demands the impossible of Stephanie by asking her to bear witness to her and her being okay, while Stephanie begins to regard this process not as a mutual dialogue but as an impossible task set by the speaker for the listener. Her argument that such a task is asking the impossible then informs her final decision not to speak out about Pauline's decapitation of Gloria, and thereby to leave the narrative absent of one essential factor. In the end, Stephanie decides that she 'wouldn't tell Rilsky anything anyway', reasoning that '[a]ll in all, Rilsky was right, and there simply wasn't anything to be said' (211). Like Caravaggio's peasant woman she stops her ears to the decapitation, choosing instead to go to a Mozart concert with Rilsky to 'listen to a bit of music', citing it as an 'excellent excuse for not talking or answering questions or analysing one another' (211). The novel ends with her getting a lump in her throat, 'one of those painful lumps made up of forgiveness, mawkish emotion, and cursed kindness', and leaving 'the Harrison villa as fast as she could, without another

word' (211). The concert also gives her the opportunity not to speak, to stop asking questions and analysing other people. Finally, as she leaves Gloria's villa, she begins to distance herself emotionally by using terms like 'mawkish' and 'cursed' to undercut the unabashedly emotional approach she maintained throughout the course of her investigation.

While Stephanie does not outright state her reasoning behind her decision to remain silent, she does follow up with this question: 'Was it up to a journalist, a young woman from Paris, to imagine us, to plunge again into the quagmire that was Santa Varvara?' (211). I interpret this as an indication that she makes a decision informed by her position relative to the space of failure she is questing it. Stephanie here reiterates the similarities she shares with Gloria – their successful careers, that they are women, their foreignness – those very attributes that drew towards her friend resentment and hatred in Santa Varvara. By doing so, she locates both Gloria's murder and her final decision within the space of failure, thus recalling the consequence of her friend displaying these attributes visibly in Santa Varavara. Stephanie deems the creation of a narrative of Gloria, and by extension of herself, one that is complete and undistorted by hatred, as an impossible task. It is ultimately Stephanie's failure to speak that prevents Gloria's story from being heard. Having earlier declared her detective career over, she now frames herself as a journalist and woman from Paris who has no business interfering in Santavarvaran affairs. Thus, she ensures that Gloria's story will never be heard or told in Santavarvara, that the only story in circulation will be a false image and stereotypical version of the narrative. Stephanie's abandonment of her emotional approach as a detective and failure to tell Gloria's story, however, does not entirely negate the novel's emotional core. Her efforts at assuming the role of detective do in fact lead her to the truth, one only accessible through her process of listening to Gloria's narrative rather than indifferently constructing a distorted image. In doing so, the novel emphasises the need for a method of listening to and representing female narrative that does not completely dismiss emotionality in favour of rationality, but rather prioritises the importance of empathy and compassion.

Quest literature, and by extension detective quests, display the tendency of relegating women to the position of side-characters, thereby limiting female-led and

centric narratives. My analysis of *Possessions* seeks to address this by not only featuring a female quest with Stephanie in the role of detective, but also by concerning itself with the problems of narrating and representing female experience. By centring the quest around not only finding the truth about Gloria's death but also her life, it elevates her beyond the traditionally passive and fetishized female murder victim. *Possessions* is largely concerned with the various images of Gloria that circulate in Santa Varvara, proliferated by the public, press, and police. Stephanie initially assumes the role of detective, however, this is systematically replaced by her desire to narrate a more truthful and representative story. This act of narration, I argued, is predicated on her bearing witness to Gloria by listening to her story and relating it for others to hear. This attempt, however, fails as depicted when she has the opportunity to speak and allow Gloria's story to be heard. Stephanie chooses to remain silent, not only allowing Pauline to escape justice and assume care of Jerry, but also assuring that Gloria's narrative will remain incomplete and misrepresented. My reading of the novel thereby uses the failed quest to explore the difficulty in narrating female-oriented stories, and advocates for a more empathetic and compassionate approach to listening and speaking.

## 5. Basma Abdel Aziz's *The Queue*

The uprisings that spread throughout the Middle East and North Africa between 2010 and 2012 were one of the most widely reported events of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century so far. As the protests unfolded, every event and contributing factor was debated, disseminated, analysed, and written on at length. The term 'Arab Spring' rapidly gained traction globally as the moniker used to define the revolutions after its emergence and growing ubiquity within the US media, with whose global reach a narrative emerges, one primarily concerned with large groups of internet-savvy youths fighting for Western-oriented political and economic systems. As governments began to respond with violence against the protestors, the euphoria and optimism that characterised the early days of the revolutions gave way to disillusionment and chaos, with subsequent regimes falling woefully short of expectations. 25<sup>th</sup> January 2011 saw tens of thousands of Egyptians take to Tahrir Square in downtown Cairo to protest government corruption, police brutality, poverty and unemployment, and demand the overthrow of President Hosni Mubarak. The protestors were met with violence, first from the police and then the military, and the two and a half weeks of demonstrations saw at least 840 people killed and over 6,000 injured. On the 11<sup>th</sup> February, Mubarak stepped down from office, thus ending his near thirty-year presidency. The Supreme Council of Armed Forces (SCAF) subsequently assumed power for seventeen months, which saw the continued violent suppressing of protests and murder of over 120 protestors. Mohamed Morsi became the country's first democratically elected president in a presidency which continued the legacy of violent clashes between protestors and government security forces. After barely a year in office, Morsi was overthrown by a military coup led by Abdul Fatah El-Sisi in July 2013. On 14<sup>th</sup> August 2013, security forces opened fire on a demonstration in Rab'a Square organised in support of Morsi, in which over 1,150 people were killed.<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> See Maha Abdelraham's *Egypt's Long Revolution: Protest Movements and Uprisings* (2104), a report compiled by Human Rights Watch, 'All According to Plan: The Rab'a Massacre and Mass Killings of Protesters in Egypt' (2014), Sherif Khalifa's *Egypt's Lost Spring: Causes and Consequences* (2015), and Khalifa Alfadhel's *The Failure of the Arab Spring* (2016).



The immediate aftermath of the Egyptian Revolution is where Basma Abdel Aziz locates her debut novel *The Queue*, published in Arabic in 2013 and translated by Elizabeth Jaquette in 2016. The novel depicts the fear and exhaustion that consumes everyday existence following a failed revolution by taking the mundane act of queueing at a government building as its central conceit. In the novel, after a failed uprising referred to as the Disgraceful Events, government authority takes the form of a massive Gate in front of which citizens wait every day in an ever-growing queue in order to request permission to access basic necessities. The queue keeps getting longer as the Gate never opens and its subjects are perpetually left waiting for their needs to be fulfilled, including the novel's protagonist Yehya Gad el-Rab Saeed. Yehya was hit by a stray bullet during the uprising and now requires a permit from the Gate in order to undergo surgery for its removal. The novel chronicles Yehya's quest for this permit, a quest that largely consists of him hunting down medical files and X-rays all the while waiting in the queue for the Gate to open. As Yehya continues to wait, his physical condition worsens and by the end of the novel, he has failed to make any significant progress in his quest and is left still waiting in the queue. As a result of this failure however, his surgeon Tarek, moved by his patient's deteriorating physical and mental state, is shaken out of his complacency and passivity, and the novel ends with him taking a stand and resisting the oppressive control of the Gate. I will begin contextualising this chapter by discussing the various terms that have been used to describe Abdel Aziz's text to explore how it functions as a post-revolutionary, Egyptian, dystopian novel. I will then examine Yehya's role as the novel's quester, arguing that his characterisation as someone who waits indefinitely in false hope for a permit to undergo his surgery renders him a more stationary and passive version of the questing protagonist. In analysing his motivation, I explore how getting shot forces him to engage with the political system against his will, thereby illuminating the dichotomy between resistance and complacency that the novel is concerned with. The next section will focus on the characters that Yehya encounters on his quest, arguing that Abdel Aziz depicts a diverse array of characters which are all connected by the fact that they must wait in the queue. I will then explore the novel's space of failure, arguing that Abdel Aziz depicts a dystopic vision of post-revolutionary Egypt as primarily characterised by the fear of

erasure. The last section will look at Yehya's failure to get the permit to undergo the surgery and how his struggle and ultimate failure functions as Tarek's call to action, inspiring him to resist.

I will first contextualise the novel within the various descriptive terms that are attributed to Abdel Aziz's novel: post-revolutionary, Egyptian, and dystopic. Reading the novel as a post-revolutionary text contradicts the ubiquity of the now-established terminology of 'Arab Spring'. As Matt Evans argues, the media framing of international conflicts 'determines the way in which the public and policy-makers perceive the causes, consequences and importance of those conflicts, and where diplomatic and material resources are committed' (209). The controversy surrounding the term 'Arab Spring' used as a term framing the events that unfolded across the Middle East and North Africa – as opposed to revolutions, uprisings, or protests – largely centres around three issues: the undermining of the significance inherent in the term, its use as a method of controlling the outcome, and the generalising nature of the term. In an article entitled 'Drop the Orientalist term "Arab Spring"', Rami G. Khouri details his reasons for 'banishing' the term from his writing, and urges others to follow suit, arguing that it 'is not used at all by those brave men and women who have been on the streets demonstrating and dying for seven months now' ("Drop the Orientalist"). 'Every time I run into a Tunisian, Egyptian, Libyan, Syrian, Bahraini or Yemeni, I ask them how they refer to their own political actions', he elaborates, 'Their answer is an almost universal, "Revolution" (or *thawra*, in Arabic). And when they refer to the collective activities of Arabs across the region, they often use the plural "revolutions" (or *thawrat*)' ("Drop the Orientalist"). Khouri asserts that "'Spring" is a passive term – it just happens to people – helpless people who have no power and no say in the process', and thus its use 'downplays the severity of the challenge to existing regimes and downgrades the intensity and depth of the courage that ordinary men and women summon when they dare to take on their often brutal, well armed national security services' ("Drop the Orientalist"). The use of revolution as exclusively the purview of Western conflicts is further emphasised by William Spanos who argues that

All of the characteristics of this Revolution, from its major to its most minor gestures and wherever its flashpoints, seem to resist the representational system

– the ‘regime of truth’ in Michel Foucault’s phrase – that is endemic to Western modernity. To introduce a locution that will become prominent in the sequel, these characteristics of this Arabic Revolution *refuse to accept the name* that the modern West has devised to explain – and contain – revolutions, thus signalling the *nothing* that the truth discourse of the modern West will monomaniacally have nothing to do with, the void that haunts the latter’s discursive plenitude. (83-4)

Thus, adopting such terminology is a method of not only undermining the revolutions but also trying to contain and control their outcome. Joseph Massad follows in the same vein, stating that ‘Arab Spring’, rather than being ‘simply an arbitrary or even season choice of nomenclature’ was ‘a US strategy of controlling their aims and goals’ (“The ‘Arab Spring’”). Lastly, Lisa Anderson stresses the diversity of the revolutions and the importance of local context as a counterpoint to the various generalising narratives that emerged, namely those that focused on ‘how the globalization of the norms of civic engagement shaped the protesters’ aspirations’ or on ‘how the activist used technology to share ideas and tactics’ (2). ‘Instead’, she argues, ‘the critical issue is how and why these ambitions and techniques resonated in their various local contexts’ in which ‘[t]he patterns and demographics of the protests varied widely’, with her analysis addressing Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya (2). She concludes that ‘[a]lthough they shared a common call for personal dignity and responsive government, the revolutions across these three countries reflected divergent economic grievances and social dynamics – legacies of their diverse encounters with modern Europe and decades under unique regimes’ (2-3). In this chapter, I shall therefore read *The Queue* as a post-revolutionary novel, specifically, how the characters negotiate with living in their country following a failed revolution. Furthermore, I examine how Abdel Aziz utilises the dystopic tradition so as to represent the aftermath of the uprisings in Egypt.

‘Revolutions are stories we tell in perfect arc’, Marya Hannun states in her review of Abdel Aziz’s novel (“After the Fall”). ‘The language used to describe them contains all of the inexorable momentum that drives grand narratives. Words like *movement*, *gathering*, *uprising* culminate in an *overthrow*, a *toppling*, a *fall*. It is the stuff of good Aristotelian drama’ (“After the Fall”). However, while ‘a revolution lends

itself naturally to literature, what follows is uncharted waters' ("After the Fall"). Writing in the summer of 2012, Ahdaf Soueif also identifies the relevance of dystopian literature in Egypt, emphasising the difficulty in narrating revolution. 'In Egypt', she writes, 'in the decade of slow, simmering discontent before the revolution, novelists produced texts of critique, of dystopia, of nightmare. Now, we all seem to have given up – for the moment – on fiction' ("In times of crisis"). Soueif expresses hope that the time for '[f]iction will come again' and maintains that '[a]ttempts at fiction right now would be too simple. The immediate truth is too glaring to allow a more subtle truth to take form. For reality has to take time to be processed, to transform into fiction' ("In times of crisis"). However, in the years following the uprising, Egypt saw a 'post-revolutionary boom of two pre-revolution literary genres, ... dystopian novels and "ironic literature" (adab sākhir)' (Chiti 286). Elena Chiti argues that this is due to both genres asserting a 'claim to realism' (286). 'The depiction of a hopeless upcoming time, in its most tragic and violent aspects', she elaborates, depicts a perception of contemporary Egypt 'as the wrong post-2011 future. Considered as an alteration of a linear, progressive evolution, reality itself can appear as fiction: an ironic reversal of the authentic reality that should have followed the end of Mubarak's regime' (186). Alexandra Alter cites Abdel Aziz's novel as an example of this tendency, as part of 'a new wave of dystopian and surrealist fiction from Middle Eastern writers who are grappling with the chaotic aftermath and stinging disappointments of the Arab Spring' ("Middle Eastern Writers"). 'Dystopian themes are not entirely new in Arabic fiction', she notes, 'but they have become much more prominent in recent years, publishers and translators say' ("Middle Eastern Writers"). Alter cites two reasons for the genre's proliferation, that it is capable of capturing 'the sense of despair that many writers say they feel in the face of cyclical violence and repression' and simultaneously that the use of 'futuristic settings may give writers some measure of cover to explore charged political ideas without being labeled dissidents' ("Middle Eastern Writers"). The proliferation of dystopian literature in Egypt is thereby not surprising given the genre's tendency towards political critique and its relation to political engagement, yet I argue that *The Queue* does not follow in its tradition of depicting futuristic visions as a warning for the present but rather represents the present itself.

In *Archaeologies of the Future*, Fredric Jameson differentiates between two forms of dystopia: critical dystopia and anti-utopia. Critical dystopia presents itself as a warning for the future, functioning based on the principle of ‘if this goes on’ (as envisioned in Robert A. Heinlein’s eponymous short story). Jameson details how the ‘critical dystopia is a negative cousin of the Utopia proper, for it is in the light of some positive conception of human social possibilities that its effects are generated and from Utopian ideals its politically enabling stance derives’ (198). In contrast anti-utopia ‘springs from a conviction about human nature itself, whose corruption and lust for power are inevitable, and not to be remedied by new social measures or programs, nor by heightened consciousness of the impending dangers’ (198). They differentiate themselves from critical dystopias in ‘the way in which they are informed by a central passion to denounce and to warn against Utopian programs in the political realm’ (199). Baccolini and Moylan (2000) likewise maintain that while traditional dystopias maintain a utopian impulse outside their pages, critical dystopias maintain it within the text: ‘Traditionally a bleak, depressing genre with little space of hope within the story, dystopias maintain utopian hope *outside* their pages, if at all’ (7, emphasis in original). It is only if, they argue, ‘we consider dystopia as a warning that we as readers can hope to escape its pessimistic future’ (7). Characters in classic dystopias like *Nineteen Eighty-Four* or *Brave New World* ‘are all crushed by the authoritarian society; there is no learning, no escape for them’, and differentiate critical dystopias from this tradition (7). In contrast, ‘critical dystopias allow both readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work’ (7, emphasis in original). Therefore, ‘by rejecting the traditional subjugation of the individual at the end of the novel, the critical opens a space of contestation and opposition for those collective “ex-centric” subjects whose class, gender, race, sexuality, and other positions are not empowered by hegemonic rule’ (7). In Moylan’s view, the role of critical dystopia is not to simply present a nightmarish view of the future, but to offer a critique of the present, positing that ‘explorations of the oppositional spaces and possibilities from which the next round of political activism can derive imaginative sustenance and inspiration’. Characteristic of the dystopian genre is the ultimate representation of failure as a warning for readers to change their ways

before it's too late. This means, however, that they usually retain a sense of hope in that the failure is a future one, one that may come to pass but could be avoided through human efforts. The bleakness of the dystopic vision is tempered by the awareness that something could be done to prevent it from happening. Within this there is a sense of unreality and a lack of urgency which engenders complacency and postpones political engagement. Furthermore, the representation is generally so far removed from reality that there is a perceived implausibility inherent in dystopias' attempts to represent what could happen. On the other hand, dystopias could present an outlook so bleak that it results in feelings of hopelessness and thus futility of action. However, written shortly after the failure of the revolution and inspired directly by scenes witnessed in Egypt, in *The Queue* Abdel Aziz does not allow for this kind of avoidance because, as I argue in this chapter, the failure depicted in the novel is not a futuristic warning but contemporary lived reality.

### 5.1 Yehya as the novel's quester

In this section, I will identify the novel's quester Yehya as having two primary characteristics. The first is that Yehya is primarily someone who 'waits', spending the majority of the novel waiting in line and waiting for his surgery, thereby presenting a stationary example of the quest protagonist. The second is his maintaining of false hope that the Gate will eventually open so that he will be able to obtain a permit for the surgery. The fact that the Gate never opens nor shows any concrete indication of opening reflects the government's use of false hope as a means of control, ensuring that its citizens remain trapped in a constant state of waiting. Abdel Aziz's characterisation of oppression and hopelessness in terms of waiting is essential in understanding how the characters relate to their government, the people around them, and themselves. The act of waiting is a vehicle through which the individual's relation to the power structure they form a part of can be examined.<sup>73</sup> Barry Schwartz analyses the relation between waiting and exercising power, arguing that being kept waiting for extended periods of time 'is to be the subject of an assertion that one's own time (and therefore, one's social

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<sup>73</sup> See also Manpreet Janeja and Andreas Bandak's edited collection *Ethnographies of Waiting: Doubt, Hope and Uncertainty* (2018).

worth) is less valuable than the time and worth of the one who imposes the wait' (856). 'Punitive sanctioning through the imposition of waiting is met in the most extreme forms when a person is not only kept waiting but is also kept ignorant as to how long he must wait' (862). In the same vein, Bourdieu argues that the act of '[w]aiting is one of the privileged ways of experiencing the effect of power, and the link between time and power' (228). To wait, he elaborates,

implies submission: the interested aiming at something greatly desired durably – that is to say, for the whole duration of the expectancy – modifies the behaviour of the person who 'hangs', as we say, on the awaited decision. It follows that the art of 'taking one's time', of 'letting time take its time', as Cervantes puts it, of making people wait, of delaying without destroying hope, of adjourning without totally disappointing, which would have the effect of killing the waiting itself, is an integral part of the exercise of power. (228)

Both emphasise the effect that being made to wait has on one's time, specifically that the individual is degraded or dismissed by being made to wait and that indefinite waiting maintains a form of power over them. However, it is also worth pointing out the specific conceit that Abdel Aziz uses in order to represent this relation between time and power, that of the queue. To wait in a queue is an exceedingly ubiquitous part of everyday existence and thereby, as anthropologist James Holston emphasises, a significant method of performing one's citizenship. 'The quality of such mundane interaction' as that of queueing, in Holston's view, 'may in fact be more significant to people's sense of themselves in society than the occasional heroic experiences of citizenship like soldiering and demonstrating of emblematic ones like voting and jury duty' (15). In this way, 'trafficking in public space is a realm of modern society in which city residents most frequently and predictably experience the state of their citizenship' (15). 'Standing in line for services is a privileged site for studying performances of citizenship, because it entails encounters between anonymous others in public space that require the negotiation of powers, rights, and vulnerabilities' (15). The novel uses the act of waiting in a queue as the primary method of performing citizenship as its central conceit, and inherent in this performance is their submission to the Gate. Yehya, who needs a permit to undergo the surgery to remove the bullet from his pelvis, is required to wait in the

queue in order to obtain permission for his very survival. The longer he waits the worse his condition grows, as illustrated by his increasingly deteriorated physical health. The Gate's enaction of its power upon Yehya is embodied by his place in the queue as representing their ability to end his life by simply making him wait until he runs out of time. His experience of his citizenship is thereby as an individual who waits, his entire life is now waiting, and ultimately, it is waiting that will result in his death.

Yehya – as well as most of the novel's characters – are all waiting in hope of the Gate opening, of making their way to the front of the queue and having their issues addressed and basic necessities granted. Given that the Gate never opens nor shows any indication of doing so, this is evidently a false hope. Andrew Chignell differentiates false hope from hope itself, arguing that 'the falseness in false hope is not a function of the fact that just *any* sort of hope in this case would be irrational' but rather can be located in 'the fact that the subject – the hoper – is misinformed about how likely the object of his hope really is' (201, emphasis in original). 'We do talk of "giving someone false hope"', he continues, 'when we lead him to hope for something extremely unlikely. We wouldn't consider it false hope if it were directed towards what someone explicitly *knows* to be a highly improbable cure' (201, emphasis in original). Rather, it 'is based on overestimation or ignorance of the relevant probability' (201). The masses of people that queue at the Gate in Abdel Aziz's novel are inflicted with similar false hope:

'There was no shortage of reports on when the Gate would open, and this was the greatest source of chaos and contention. People at the end of the queue swapped stories that the Gate had already opened, while those stuck in the middle said they had a week ahead of them at most. Other stubborn rumors, whose provenance no one knew, said that the people standing at the front had heard voices coming from behind the Gate: whole conversations, the rustling of papers, the clatter of cups and spoons. But when these rumors finally reached the people at the front, they said they'd only seen shadows, arriving and departing, but that the gate hadn't opened and no one had ever actually appeared'. (70)

As evident in this quote, the majority of information that citizens receive about the Gate opening is transmitted predominately through word of mouth and rumours. The sense of



chaos this engenders causes contention among those in the queue. The smallest indication that they might make progress, even if it is simply the thought that there may be someone behind the Gate about to address their concerns is reason enough to keep hoping and waiting.

The lack of concrete information regarding the Gate acts as an effective method of keeping the citizens constantly primed for movement that will never materialise. Abdel Aziz introduces the novel's protagonist in a way that renders him an embodiment of this sense of false hope:

In the fierce heat, Yehya stood in a long queue that extended from the end of the wide street all the way to the Gate. A whole hour and he'd moved no more than two steps forward, and that wasn't because there had been progress at the front of the queue. Some inexperienced soul – probably someone who had never been to the Gate before – was overcome with boredom, got discouraged, and left ...

The young man standing behind him asked what time the Gate opened, and Yehya shrugged. He had no idea when it would finally happen. But he still left his house each morning, dragging his feet and his stomach and his pelvis, all of it heavy, to stand in the queue without ever reaching the Gate. (10)

In this introduction, Yehya is defined in terms of his standing stationary in the queue and contrasted against those less willing to wait. The first gets discouraged by the entire process and not yet having been inflicted with the same false hope, decides to leave. The second displays impatience at how long they have been there, questioning what time the Gate opens and thereby indicating that he has not yet accepted his status as someone who waits. These figures are characterised by inexperience and youth, not yet having adapted to the queue in which one waits indefinitely for the Gate which never opens. Yehya is introduced in contrast to these two figures. He is resolute in his determination not to leave the queue despite having made no real progress, and willing to stand and wait until that indefinite time when his concerns will be addressed. His reluctance to leave the queue or attempt to find an alternative means of achieving his goal is further emphasised by his nagging doubts that his waiting is in fact hopeless. Yehya describes how '[p]eople around him stood there so resolutely, he hadn't seen many sleeping or even sitting down in recent days. Everyone expected the queue to move at any minute,

and they wanted to be ready' (17). The longer he waits, the more he finds 'himself doing the same, even though he didn't believe what they told him about the Gate – that it might open at dawn, or even deep in the middle of the night (18). At every setback, however, he is plagued by the realisation that his efforts are futile: 'he cast a long look at the Gate. From afar, it looked like a solid wall, and he wondered in despair whether it would ever open' (63). Yehya thereby lives in the space between hope and hopelessness, being 'filled with despair and desire to hide away', while simultaneously 'infused with a yearning to survive, to start life anew and experience again every moment of sadness and joy and absurdity' (94). It is this sense of hope, that he can undergo the surgery and survive, that he can live a full and happy life with his friends and girlfriend Amani, that keep him resolute in standing in the queue in the false hope that it will open someday soon. Yet, exempting his physical deterioration and his increasingly hopeless outlook, Yehya begins and ends his quest without having made progress. The opening of the novel sees him dying from the bullet in his pelvis and waiting in the queue to obtain permission to have it removed. By the end of the novel, he is in exactly the same position, having been repeatedly frustrated in his attempts. The first depiction of Yehya in the novel thereby sets the scene for the rest of the novel, with him waiting in the queue and making no significant progress despite the significant amount of time he devotes to it. While he waits in the queue in the hope that he will be able to make the system work for him, his friend Nagy is distinctly aware that '[d]espite how often the Gate released these promising updates, it still had never reopened, and nothing ever really changed. All it provided was hope for the people to cling to and a reason to stay in the queue' (110). Abdel Aziz makes it clear that the false hope that the Gate will eventually open functions as an effective means of maintaining control over the populace. The people in the queue are constantly receiving reports and hearing rumours that the Gate will open soon and their needs will be addressed. This makes sure that they never leave the queue for fear that when they do, that will finally be the day it opens. The increasing necessity to apply at the Gate for even the most basic of requirements, such as food and medical procedures, creates an entire country of citizens whose lives are effectively stalled, waiting in a queue in front of a building that will never open. As the novel's quester, Yehya embodies both the act of indefinite waiting and the sense of

false hope. In doing so, he functions as a more stationary and passive version of the quest protagonist. This, in turn, is reflected by the progress he makes throughout the novel. By the end of the narrative, Yehya is no closer to achieving the permit than when he first joined the queue.

## **5.2 Yehya's motivation to quest**

Yehya's actual concern reflects the simplicity of his goal, being purely about survival. It is not Yehya's goal or motivation that complicates his quest but the world he is questing in, one in which bureaucracy transcends governmental intransigence or incompetence and becomes malicious and deadly. Removing the bullet requires surgery, the surgery cannot be done without a permit, applying for the permit requires an X-ray, and above all final permission must be granted by waiting in the queue which never moves for the Gate which never opens. While depictions of bureaucratic systems invoke a feeling of endlessness for those snarled in them, Yehya does not have the time. The pain spreading from his pelvis to his stomach, his deteriorating physical health and energy, and the growing rings of concentric circles of blood appearing in his underwear all serve as indications of his limited time to achieve his goal, something he ultimately fails to do. As I examine in this section, getting shot ensures that Yehya is forced, along with his surgeon Tarek, to negotiate the complex and convoluted machinations of the state and engage in the relationship between submission and resistance it engenders. Abdel Aziz repeatedly emphasises the unavoidable and overwhelming nature of the state's presence, a feature that manifests both in the size of the Gate and its control over its citizens. The Gate gradually comes to exert more and more control over its subjects' lives, eventually becoming inescapable. 'Since the Gate had materialized and insinuated itself into everything', Yehya notes, 'people didn't know where its affairs ended and their own began' (31). Nagy similarly notes that in addition to being an overwhelming physical presence, the Gate and its queue also exert a psychological presence. He wonders 'what made people so attached to their new lives of spinning in orbit around the queue, unable to venture beyond it. People hadn't been idiots before they came to the Gate with their paperwork' (90). Now, however, 'they all had the same look about them, the same lethargy. Now they were even all starting to think the same way' (90).

This is reminiscent of Hannah Arendt's description in *The Origins of Totalitarianism* of how '[t]otalitarian bureaucracy, with a more complete understanding of the meaning of absolute power, intruded upon the private individual and his inner life with equal brutality' (320). 'The result of this radical efficiency', she argues, 'has been that the inner spontaneity of people under its rule was killed along with their social and political activities, so that the merely political sterility under the older bureaucracies was followed by total sterility under totalitarian rule' (320).<sup>74</sup> Yehya is suffering the effects of this intrusion upon his inner life, and while he resents the oppression of the Gate, he makes no attempts to subvert its authority or rebel against it.

The beginning of the novel reveals Yehya's participation in the revolution to have been half-hearted, having only been briefly present out of vague curiosity before being hit by a stray bullet after hearing 'about people who could no longer stand what was happening. Word spread that a small group of people, who had recently joined together, were going to organize a protest' (33). Yehya's response is scepticism 'that an uprising would be possible under the Gate's reign, but all the same he excused himself from work and left at the agreed-upon time, having decided to watch from afar' (33). Yehya's lukewarm regard participation in what the novel refers to as the Disgraceful Events is reflected and indeed taken further by his surgeon Tarek who having been absent from the square relies on 'passing comments from colleagues and acquaintances, neighbors, and fellow passengers on public transport' in order to form 'a vague image of the events, hazy in the details but enough for him to participate when people brought it up in conversation' (7). Tarek's information is based on hearsay and rumours, and is only acquired in order to save face if asked about his opinion:

If asked, he would produce an opinion about how certain people – who were angry about being forced to follow the strict order the Gate had imposed soon after it appeared – had caused an unnecessary uproar. They'd rejected its new rules, and wanted to create a different, less authoritarian system, as Tarek had

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<sup>74</sup> Arendt differentiates 'between the old-fashioned rule by bureaucracy and the up-to-date totalitarian brand' in that 'Russia's and Austria's pre-war rulers were content with an idle radiance of power and, satisfied to control its outward destinies, left the whole inner life of the soul intact' (320). The distinction between bureaucracy and totalitarian bureaucracy is one which this chapter will return to in its discussion on the novel's space of failure.

understood. They'd wanted a more lenient regime, one perhaps more tolerant, but, in Tarek's opinion, it was also less stable. (7)

Both Yehya and Tarek thus exhibit scepticism of the protesters' demands as well as reluctance to engage directly. Both characters have relatively comfortable lives – Yehya has a loving relationship with his girlfriend Amani, Tarek has a stable, well-paid job as a surgeon – and before the Disgraceful Events saw very little, if any, need to engage politically. Abdel Aziz, however, introduces an interrupting force into their lives that functions to shake them out of their complacency. This comes to Yehya in the form of the bullet, as he is shot before even arriving at the protest: 'He had taken just a few steps in the direction of the square when he suddenly lost consciousness' (33). The act of getting shot thus renders it impossible for Yehya to maintain a distance from the political system, requires him navigate through the totalitarian bureaucracy in the hope of survival. However, he also becomes targeted by the state as the bullet is proof that the government had violently suppressed the protest by shooting at its citizens. They insist that there were not shots fired at protesters, no violent suppression of the rebellion at all, in a false narrative that is also inscribed on to the landscape. Diesel fuel is used in order to 'clean up the square and surrounding streets, and to remove the stains and traces left by the Disgraceful Events' (69). Jaquette draws attention to the moment when 'Amani notices that the street outside has been cleaned recently ... alluding to the government assiduously erasing all evidence of clashes or protests, to protect the image of its power and stability' ('Let loose' 8). Yehya, or more specifically the bullet in his pelvis, therefore becomes concrete proof of the violent protests the Gate is trying to erase. By 'carrying a government bullet inside his body', Yehya's friend Ehab notes, '[he] possessed tangible evidence of what had really happened during the Disgraceful Events, and was perhaps the only person still alive who was willing to prove what the authorities had done' (115). Ehab's lauding of his friend's determination to prove the guilt of the authorities, however, is a projection of his own sentiments towards the Gate. In fact, Yehya has no actual intention of using his injury to hold the government to account or prevent the erasure of the protests. His motivation to quest is solely to gain the permit that will allow him have the surgery yet is imbued with subversive significance against his will.

Yehya's reluctance to play this role and wish to simply go about his life is evident in the following scene in which he thinks about the bullet lodged in his pelvis:

Tarek had explained so many possible outcomes during their first meeting: the most hopeful was that the bullet might surrender and settle somewhere safe, surrounded by the protective tissue that the body naturally forms around any foreign object that disturbs its natural integrity. Then all these elements would become one: the bullet, tissue, and various unknown secretions forming a tranquil, untroublesome mass that would stay with him for the rest of his life. But it seemed the bullet had chosen another path, launching an incursion into his intestines, puncturing them and perhaps soon poisoning his blood. (100)

The bullet's presence in his body and the potential outcomes of his injury are related with the terminology of revolution, with the bullet functioning as a representation of the individual and the surrounding tissue and organs as various aspects that constitute the political system, that is, the body. Yehya maintains hope that the bullet will no longer 'disturb' the 'natural integrity' of its surroundings, that it will 'surrender and settle somewhere safe', integrating to form a 'tranquil, untroublesome mass'. The bullet, however, is also imbued with the ability to launch an 'incursion', with the potential to intensely damage and even destroy the entire system. This paragraph does not only function to reinforce Yehya's apathetic view of the revolution, it also emphasises the impossibility of ignoring the surrounding political system. Abdel Aziz identifies the notion that following violence and oppression individuals can settle down, can be safe, tranquil, and untroublesome. Rather, all individuals will eventually encounter an interruption force, potentially a violent one, because of which they must engage with the system. Tarek is also reluctant to rebel, even more so than Yehya, being 'a man who didn't overstep boundaries, a man who'd never been to the Gate, not once in his life. No questions, no problems – life passed him by both predictably and monotonously, just as he liked it' (5). In this case it becomes Yehya himself who functions as the interrupting force for Tarek: 'The only thing hindering this stable, traditional plan of his was Yehya Gad el-Rab Saeed' (6). Whereas the bullet serves as an interrupting force for Yehya, it is Yehya himself who does so for Tarek. As I will discuss later, Tarek's increased interest in his dying patient functions as a catalyst for his eventual resistance. As both are forced

to become entangled in the political process, they are challenged to become active participants and rise up against the Gate. Abdel Aziz presents a subversion of the readers' expectations that Yehya getting shot would function as his call to action, his subsequent committed political engagement motivating him to rebel and subvert the system. Yet his insistence on only going through official channels and reluctance to consider the wider implications of the Gate prevent this from happening. In doing so, she presents a nuanced articulation of her protagonist's motivation to quest. He does not have any desire to rebel against the system oppressing him, rather he merely wants to undergo the surgery and put the whole ordeal behind him. It is his brief and disinterested presence at the protest that renders this resolution impossible, however, with the stray bullet forcing him to enter the complex political machinations against his will. Both Yehya and Tarek are forced to become involved in the political process, both are placed in circumstances that challenges them to become active participants and rise against the Gate. Yehya fails to do so, becoming increasingly submerged in despair and passivity, but, as I will discuss later, it is the very futility and failure of his quest that ultimately inspires Tarek to rebel.

### **5.3 Encounters in the queue**

In this section, I will focus on Abdel Aziz's treatment of the citizens that populate her dystopian setting, most of whom are waiting in the queue for their needs to be addressed. Like the Gate it forms in front of, the queue is massive in scale, with rumours circulating that it extends into neighbouring cities and is constantly growing. 'The queue grew longer and longer every day', Yehya notes, 'and the space it took up grew ever wider. He noticed that while only a few people left and didn't return, new waves arrived every day, stretching the queue ever farther' (63). As with the Gate, information about the queue is scarce, and so there is much conjecture about how long the queue actually is and by extension, how long those standing in it will be forced to wait. The various estimations of its length thus become a source of tension during an incident in which those 'standing at the threshold of the Gate estimated that there were three whole kilometres between them and the end of the queue – much to the chagrin of

those near the end, who insisted they weren't nearly that far away' (28). The discrepancy between those at the front and those at the back nearly comes to blows

[a]t the queue's midpoint ... when a well-known surveyor standing in the middle of the queue intervened and volunteered to settle the matter. Asking for a bit of quiet, he ran some quick calculations, using his geographical knowledge of the area, information provided to him by both parties (representatives from the beginning and the end of the queue), and a detailed description of the area's various landmarks and general terrain. He made sure to include land now occupied by the queue's most recent additions, those who had joined throughout the night. Finally, with pen and paper in hand, the man announced that the distance was in fact approximately two kilometres. Those who had been at each other's throats just a moment before were satisfied and stopped shouting, pleased with the results'. (28)

This particular incident reveals several characteristic aspects that define the queue. Firstly, the fact that it is conjecture over the true length of the queue that brings people to blows, emphasising the value attributed to one's position in the queue. The places that the characters have in the queue are exceedingly important to them, as they make bargains in order to move further up and create rules about leaving one's place that become set in stone. Whether the actual length of the queue is two or three kilometres becomes an essential question, as being closer to the front would presumably signal that one has a shorter waiting time and is therefore closer to having one's needs fulfilled. However, the fact that the Gate never opens and that the queue never moves negates this assumption, resulting in vast masses of people waiting fruitlessly. Furthermore, the number of people joining the queue is constantly on the increase, as Yehya indicates above. The most recent additions who arrive that night make enough of a contribution that the surveyor needs to account for them in his calculations, indicating that there is a rapidly growing number of people whose requirements are not being met by the government. Finally, the fact that it was a 'well-known surveyor', a man of some standing and wealth that makes these estimations. This brings up a facet of Abdel Aziz's dystopic setting that I elaborate on in this section, the fact that the queue grows to



encompass people from all walks of life within it, indicating an inescapable and hopeless system.

The novel's main conceit of the Gate and the queue that forms behind it had its genesis in an actual queue witnessed by Abdel Aziz in Downtown Cairo in September 2012. 'While walking down a main street', she recounts, 'I came across a long queue of people waiting in front of a closed governmental building. The gate to the building would certainly open shortly, I thought to myself; after all, it was nearly midday' ('Basma Abdel Aziz'). Upon returning two hours later she saw 'the same people standing exactly where they had been. They hadn't moved. There were more of them now, yet the gate was still closed ... Noon had turned into afternoon, yet nothing had changed' ('Basma Abdel Aziz'). In this essay, she questions aspects of the queue that I have already touched on in this chapter: 'Why didn't any of them speak up in protest or frustration about the delay; why didn't anyone suggest they all leave?' ('Basma Abdel Aziz') Her primary interest, however, was that all these people did not seem to have anything in common, that they didn't seem connected by anything other than their standing in the same queue. 'Some seemed financially comfortable', she noted, 'while others looked poor, there were women and men, elderly and young people, and even children playing nearby. I wondered why they stood there so long in vain' ('Basma Abdel Aziz'). In accordance, Abdel Aziz's representation of a totalitarian bureaucracy emerges as a system in which everyone, despite distinctions of age, class, or gender, regardless of whether they support or oppose the system, are subject to its decrees. This concern is observed in the novel by Yehya's friend Nagy who notes the presence of 'women and men, young and old people, professionals and the working class. No section of society was missing, even the poorest of the poor were there, not separated from the rich by any means. Everyone was on equal ground' (90). The sole factor that connects all the disparate people waiting in the queue is that their lives are all controlled by the same state, that they are all oppressed under the same system. As the Gate begins to exert more control over its subjects, rendering them incapable of addressing basic needs without seeking permission, the characters begin to adapt their lives around it. The queue thereby emerges as a microcosm of society, featuring not only its population but also its own transport system, café, and unspoken rules in amongst the human drama

and tensions that concern everyday life. Despite being subject to the Gate decrees and requiring its permission to access basic services, waiting in the queue does not render people's lives completely stationary. Through the depiction of the characters Yehya encounters, the novel's dystopic setting is one in which human existence goes on despite it, in which individuals progress with their lives, if not in the queue. Um Mabrouk enters the queue a cleaner struggling to make ends meet and throughout the novel manages to establish a successful business providing tea and other services to other people in the queue. An unnamed character known as 'the woman with the short hair' organises a boycott against the telephone company that is listening to their calls and reporting dissent to the Gate. Shalaby begins the narrative a fervent supporter of the Gate, confident that he will be able to receive a medal to honour his brother who died fighting the protestors on behalf of the government during the Disgraceful Events. The longer he waits unsuccessfully, the more desperate and frustrated he grows until he buys a medal off a homeless woman and passes it off as an honour from the government so as to save face. Whether the progress they undergo is emancipatory, like Um Mabrouk and the woman with the short hair, or whether they become further worn down by the system as with Shalaby, or Amani and Ines as I will explore in the next section, most of the characters are at different places in their lives by the end of the novel. This is significant as physically they all remain in their exact place in the queue, barring the occasional exchanging of places that occurs or someone leaving or disappearing; and the Gate remains closed, making physical progress impossible. By showing them change and make progress, Abdel Aziz presents a cast of characters that are simultaneously determined and adaptable, able to make the best of their circumstances same as they are to settle for less.

As evident in the case of Shalaby, even the most fervent supporters of the established system are not villainised in the novel. In fact, the reader is not given a figure to represent the Gate and it remains, as Jaquette points out, a 'faceless presence' throughout the novel, with even those 'loyal to or associated with it ... still subject to its decrees' ("Let loose"). With no official representatives, the presence of the Gate is represented solely by the imposing structure of the building that prevents anyone from entering. Amani describes the Northern Building as

a strange crimson octagonal structure, slightly higher than the concrete walls that extended from it on either side. The main entrance to the building was the Gate itself, built into one of its eight sides. It had no visible windows or balconies, only barren walls of cast iron. If it weren't for the people who'd once entered it and told of all the rooms and offices inside, anyone gazing up at it would have imagined it be to a massive block, solid and impenetrable. (35)

This description of the building as a solid, impenetrable concrete block emphasises the impossibility of accessing the building, how it provides no means of observing its procedures nor any way to put a name or face to those inside. Information about what occurs within this building is only available through rumours and propaganda, with no indication of anyone having ever been able to actually meet a government official or of obtaining permission for any of their requirements. While this decision emphasises the impossibility of accessing government services, it also functions to maintain the focus on the citizens that are trying to make a life for themselves within the system. While Abdel Aziz is critical of passivity and complacency in the face of oppression, she also displays an awareness of and sympathy towards those who are exhausted and wary of more violence and uprisings. Through the characters in the novel, both the ones that Yehya encounters and the faceless government whose representatives nobody ever sees, Abdel Aziz articulates a nuanced depiction of everyday existence dictated and controlled by a totalitarian authority free from condemnation or judgement.

#### **5.4 Dystopian Egypt as a space of failure**

Abdel Aziz's novel creates a dystopic space of failure that, I argue, is primarily defined by a constant fear of erasure, a fear that manifests in the physical, the psychological, and the political. A 2016 report by Amnesty International entitled *Egypt: 'Officially, you do not exist'* investigated the extent of enforced disappearances in the aftermath of the revolution, finding that 'tens of thousands of people have been detained without trial or sentenced to prison terms or death after often grossly unfair trials' (7). 'A sweeping crackdown on dissent', the report outlines, 'has put at least 34,000 persons – by the government's own admission – and possibly thousands more, behind bars', including 'hundreds of leaders and senior officials of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB),

supporters of ousted President Mohamed Morsi, and numerous other critics and opponents of the government' (7). Hundreds of 'political activists and protesters, including students and children, ... have been arbitrarily arrested and detained and subjected to enforced disappearances by state agents' without 'access to their lawyers or families and ... held incommunicado outside judicial oversight' (7). According to local NGOs, 'an average of three to four people are abducted and arbitrarily subjected to enforced disappearance each day' (7). In this section, I discuss how the treatment of physical disappearance is used as an effective method of control and its treatment in the novel. Since Michel Foucault's focus on the body as a target upon which disciplinary power is enacted, there has been a major shift in how the body is conceptualised as being historically and culturally constructed rather than solely a part of nature. In this light, enforced disappearance can not only be considered a physical threat but a representation of how the state's power enforces control on the body. In *Missing Bodies*, Monica Casper and Lisa Jean Moore emphasise that the 'visualized body is powerfully symbolic in a multitude of ways and across quite-contested domains' (2). They elaborate that if there are visualised bodies, then by extension there must also be 'hidden, missing, and vanished', 'bodies that are invisible, or whose absence is unaccounted for and not remarked on' (3). The implications of the invisible body is discussed by Avery Gordon in her seminal study *Ghostly Matters*. Gordon argues that disappearance, rather than being just 'a euphemism for torture and death', 'is a complex system of repression, a thing in itself' (80, 112).<sup>75</sup> 'The disappeared', she states, 'have lost all social and political identity: no bureaucratic records, no funerals, no memorials, no bodies, nobody' (80). The constant threat of disappearance creates a pervasive sense of fear, essential to maintaining control over a populace. 'Everyone', Gordon points out, 'must know enough to be terrified, but not enough either to have a clear sense of what is going on or to acquire proof that is usually required by legal tribunals or other governments for sanction' (110). I also draw again on Arendt, who makes specific reference to totalitarian countries in which 'all places of detention ruled by the police are made to be veritable holes of oblivion into which people stumble by accident and without leaving

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<sup>75</sup> On the use of torture in Egypt see Heba Morayef's report "'Work on Him Until He Confesses": Impunity for Torture in Egypt' (2011).

behind them such ordinary traces of former existence as a body and a grave' (569). 'The operation of the secret police', she continues, '... miraculously sees to it that the victim never existed at all', thereby having the 'power to erase the identity of [their] victim from the memory of the surviving world' (569). Therefore, as Banu Bargu argues, 'enforced disappearance involves an *erasing* violence' that 'renders individuals not only invisible but also anonymous' (44, 36, emphasis in original). It embodies 'a kind of violence that seeks not only to eradicate the person who is the target of enforced disappearance but also to erase the fact that the person ever existed ... it is not only about the destruction of the individual but also the elimination of the individual's prior presence' (43). My analysis of Abdel Aziz's depiction of enforced disappearance discusses how *The Queue* presents physical erasure as a threat unto itself, that the fear of becoming 'nothing' exerts its own violence and trauma on the body.

The enforced disappearances in the novel begin in earnest once the citizens declare a boycott of the telephone company Violet Telecom after 'rumors spread that some people whose conversations had been recorded had disappeared; they'd been summoned to the basement and never returned' (122). Abdel Aziz emphasises the fear that immediately infects the space, with the rumours leaving 'a visceral tension in their wake; people in the queue exchanged names of the disappeared and the dates they had vanished, distributing flyers with their pictures and pleas to return them unharmed' (122). The queue itself is initially assumed to be safer due to its citizens being 'constantly surrounded by other people' and the assurance that 'at least no one had disappeared there without returning eventually' (174). This is however, revealed to be a false sense of security as at the end of the novel when Alfat, a nurse who works with Tarek, becomes 'the first person to disappear from the queue' (213). Through the threat of enforced disappearances, therefore, the reach of the state is felt to be limitless, creating a constant sense of fear that anyone may be next. This fear is predominately represented through two characters in the novel: Ines, who becomes more anxious and withdrawn as the disappearances continue, and Amani, through whom this fear is realised as she is abducted for her association with Yehya. In both cases, Abdel Aziz does not focus on the effects of torture and death of the characters, but rather in the vein of Gordon, keeps the attention on the toll that this fear has on their mental states. With

every piece of news that another citizen had disappeared, Ines grows ‘so overwhelmed by the situation that her support for the boycott began to wane, even though she’d been one of its first champions. She grew increasingly timid and withdrawn, and stopped drinking tea with Um Mabrouk’ (130, 122). ‘She was haunted by waking dreams, imagining a photograph of herself in a turquoise headscarf printed on one of the missing-person flyers, which her mother would distribute in the queue and pass sorrowfully among the people waiting’, that ‘[s]oon she might be no more than a note in the margins of the escalating unemployment figures’ (130). This fear of disappearance causes Ines to alter her behaviour; while once she ‘never imagined she would fall victim to fear like this, having long considered herself one of the most resolute and resilient of people’, now she wishes she ‘never opened her mouth in the first place’ (130-131). Abdel Aziz, significantly, never indicates whether the state is targeting Ines and that she is actually in danger of being abducted, instead keeping the focus on the effect that the threat of being so has on her state of mind. By doing so, she emphasises how the mere threat of disappearance can exert control over the individual, and thus contribute to the pervasive sense of fear that infects every aspect of the setting.

Yehya’s girlfriend Amani, on the other hand, is definitively kidnapped and detained as punishment for attempting to retrieve Yehya’s X-ray of his pelvis, a requirement for getting the permit for his surgery. As I quote below, Abdel Aziz portrays this in terms of Amani experiencing ‘nothingness’:

Nothingness. She wasn’t blindfolded, but all she could see was black. She moved her palms away from her face ... nothing. She heard no voices, her hand felt no walls, no columns, no bars. She saw and felt nothing, only the solid earth underneath her. Where she stood or sat or slept. Perhaps she was only earth, too. She walked in every direction but met nothing but a void. She tried to scream, to be silent and listen out for other voices, to swear and curse every person who deserved to be punished for wronging her. Or even just name them. The Gate and the people who ran it. Violet Telecom. The High Sheikh. And then she took it all back and asked for forgiveness, rebelling then pleading, filled with courage then wracked with tears. But everything remained as it was: nothingness. (151-2)

Amani is not physically tortured or killed, she is not beaten or interrogated, but rather is submerged into nothingness. In that way, Amani's detention is absent of the standard methods of torture that she expects will be used on her, and it is this very absence that mentally incapacitates her.<sup>76</sup> She is not blindfolded or put behind bars, rather she cannot touch or feel anything in the space around her. She lashes out against those responsible for her detainment, but she is not interrogated and strains to hear any other voices. Amani wishes that her captors 'would beat her, she said she was ready to be tortured, she slapped her face with her hands until her cheekbones went numb, and bit her lips to feel her own blood inside her mouth but she tasted nothing' (153). It is the overwhelming presence of 'nothingness' that causes her the most severe trauma, it makes her feel like she herself is disappearing into nothingness, becoming nothing. She describes her tears as the first part of her to vanish: 'She tried to resist it; she squeezed her eyes shut, she thought about dying there to make herself cry, but the tears didn't come. They had disappeared. Evaporated' (153). Whereas first she reacts by screaming, cursing, pleading, and crying, the overwhelming nothingness causes her to mentally dissociate from her emotion, with her loss of the ability to cry functioning as the first indicator of this trauma. She begins to feel like she 'would disintegrate' in this space, 'slowly dissolving until she became nothingness ... became nothing. She was already beginning to disappear ... The first part of her had vanished; the rest would follow. She sat and wrapped her arms around herself, waiting to disappear completely' (153-154). Even following her release and relief at the return of her senses and thereby herself – '[s]he saw her face: haggard and gray but whole, her eyes and nose and mouth, her hair; it was her' (155) – she cannot escape this trauma: 'She didn't say much, and spoke without emotion or enthusiasm' (156). Most significantly, when Yehya indicates his worry for her current state she responds, 'It's nothing, Yehya. Nothing happened to me' (160). That the trauma that Amani faces is not one borne out of fear of torture or death but of nothingness is in accord with the idea of disappearance as a threat in itself in that it involves an erasing violence. Both Amani and Ines's fear of disappearance is

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<sup>76</sup> While the novel explores the psychological effects of the threat of disappearance, that is not to say that Abdel Aziz is overlooking the physical torture of Egyptian people, see her article 'Torture in Egypt' (2007).

specifically related to erasure of self with Ines imagining becoming a mere statistic or a photography and Amani imagining herself disappearing into nothingness.

This fear of erasure, as I will now discuss, is not only felt on a physical and psychological level but also on a political level. Firstly, it is important to note that totalitarian bureaucracy shares similarities but is not indistinguishable with the idea of bureaucracy either as denoting a system of administration or governance, or its associated connotations of excessive inefficiency or intransigence. Max Weber was one of the first to formalise the concept of bureaucracy in his text *Economy and Society*. Weber, however, was primarily concerned with the efficiency and rationality of the bureaucratic system and while aware of its limitations, did not associate bureaucracy with the governmental intransigence and incompetence that currently characterises it. Furthermore, he does not draw the connection with totalitarianism as did later works, including Abdel Aziz's novel. One such example of an approach which explores the relation between bureaucracy and totalitarianism is Alfred G. Meyer's comparative analysis of Soviet political structures, in which he describes the 'totalitarian and bureaucratic models of communism [as] complementary rather than mutually exclusive' (4).<sup>77</sup> Advocating for an alternative to the 'totalitarian model' that generally is used to conceptualise Communist regimes, he argues that the 'Communist system can be understood adequately by comparing it with complex modern bureaucratic organizations anywhere' (4). 'Like modern bureaucracy', he continues, 'Communist rule is essentially an attempt to impose rational management over social life by means of complex organization', an attempt which he cites as leading 'to the emergence of structural forms, political processes, psychological adjustments, as well as malfunctionings which make Communist systems look remarkably similar to bureaucratic organizations in other parts of the world' (4). Unlike modern bureaucracies, however, which by default 'exist and operate within larger societal frameworks', 'Communist systems are sovereign bureaucracies' which render the 'Communist state one single bureaucratic system extended over the entire society, or bureaucracy writ large' (4). Thus, totalitarian

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<sup>77</sup> Totalitarianism and bureaucracy are similarly connected earlier in C.J. Friedrich and Z.K. Bzzezinski's *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (1956), who definitively state that 'modern totalitarianism, unlike more traditional dictatorships, is a highly bureaucratized system of power' (35).



bureaucracy emerges as a more authoritarian and oppressive form of bureaucracy in its attempt to impose a more authoritarian form of control on individuals.

Abdel Aziz uses documents and official records as representative of a totalitarian bureaucracy that works to erase its citizens, thus negating them politically. As, she represents, the act of erasing citizens from the official record is a key method through which to exercise this power. Bureaucratic erasure is represented in the form of documents in the novel, which assume a central aspect of existence in the novel's dystopic setting. Much of the novel, in particular Yehya and his quest, is concerned with obtaining the necessary documentation, specifically written permission from the Gate in order to access basic services. The form of the novel reflects this preoccupation, interrupting the narrative with multiple documents, such as newspaper articles, Yehya's medical case files detailing his comings and goings and deteriorating physical condition, and written declarations from the Gate. The state uses documents to exert control over its citizens in two ways: firstly, through the overwhelming presence of information that functions to obfuscate the truth confusing their perception of reality, and secondly, through the use of blank spaces which reinforce the constant threat of erasure. In between the day of the Disgraceful Events and the beginning of the novel, Tarek has forgotten about Yehya, only recalling examining him when he comes across his medical records. This is mainly due to Yehya's file being unusually detailed, rather than containing the usual 'basic information ... scribbled down quickly and often haphazardly', in this case someone had been thorough in recording 'all the patient's personal information; no space was left blank. Every question had an answer, even questions a doctor might not be concerned with. Even questions an average person might be surprised to see in a medical file' (4). Tarek's already unclear memory of the day of the Disgraceful Events is further muddled by Yehya's documents, rationalising that '[l]ooking back through the file should have helped, but instead it only exacerbated his sense of confusion' (6). Adding to this lack of certainty, all information pertaining to the injury being caused by a bullet is either missing or redacted: '*bleeding around entry and exit wounds caused by a [redacted], sign of recent abrasions and bruising on the back, pelvis, and forearm regions, [redacted; injury written above it] penetrating the pelvic region along with profuse bleeding*' (40, emphasis in original). The Gate is

revealed to have a vested interest in keeping information pertaining to the bullet hidden. In order to deny that the rebellion had been violently suppressed, all proof that bullets had been fired is redacted, altered, or goes missing. The erasing of information thus serves the purpose of changing history and making it appear impossible that anyone could have been shot during the Disgraceful Events. The X-ray of Yehya's pelvis is in fact confiscated the morning after the Events and its retrieval becomes the largest obstacle in his quest to get the permit for his surgery.

In his attempt to navigate through this space of failure, I argue, Yehya is transformed into a document himself, one that is ultimately erased by the Gate. In containing proof of violence committed by the state during the Disgraceful Events, Yehya becomes a document of proof, in Tarek's words, 'his body a map of the battle' (25). The only way to erase this information is to erase Yehya himself, something which the Gate is very keen to do. Yet the erasure of Yehya is not a task which requires direct action like their erasure of Amani. Their primary method of erasure is to make it so that he cannot accomplish anything, the bureaucratic system succeeds in murdering him through simply existing. By, like Yehya, refusing to subvert the official channels, Tarek is not only a bystander to his suffering but complicit in his erasure. Abdel Aziz represents Tarek's complicity in the following scene:

Tarek removed the pencil he always kept in his coat pocket and began to doodle on the page, absorbed in the lines and curves he'd began to create, summoning an artistic side long since abandoned, one detached from everything around him ... On half of the second document, in a space without words, he had drawn a figure resembling Yehya, nearly naked, and a small, solid circle, completely shaded in, occupying a space in the lower left part of his stomach ... He picked up an eraser and carefully erased what he'd drawn. He lifted the paper up to the light coming in through the window and looked at Yehya's outline and the shadow of the solid circle, no longer there. (25)

Tarek's regular use of a pencil, one always present in his coat pocket, is significant in that anything he writes or draws is thereby rendered erasable. He becomes a participant in Yehya's erasure with his reluctance to remove the bullet, here represented by a drawn 'small, solid circle'. After shading in the bullet, he proceeds to carefully erase it, thus

removing any indication that it was ever there. Tarek thereby becomes complicit in the gradual murder of Yehya, through his complacency towards a government which seeks to simultaneously erase and replace its citizens. It is only through Tarek's gradual awareness of the relation between the overwhelming presence of the Gate and Yehya's erasure that he begins to emerge out of this complacency. As he reads through Yehya's medical file, he stops at the fifth document which 'contained nothing more than a large box as long and wide as the page itself, yellow like all the other pages. It didn't contain a single word and remained empty and pristine' (140). He comes to the realisation of the futility of filling in the blank space, and by extension, of Yehya's quest: 'he knew that this one would remain blank ... A permit for the operation was practically hopeless at this point. And if he received a rejection, the file would be close and sealed with red tape forever' (140). This moment represents his recognition of how the power and control of the Gate is predicated on their erasure of citizens: 'The box merged with the Gate in his mind, the resemblance overpowering. Vast and vague, able to contain so much. Everything in his world was determined by the Gate, bound to its decisions' (140). As he comes to this realisation, he imagines the blank space growing 'wider before his eyes, encompassing him, as if to swallow him whole and imprison him within it' (141). This moment represents Tarek's recognition of the oppressiveness of the Gate, how its control is maintained through a totalitarian bureaucracy in which citizens are erased until all that remains is the inescapable presence of the system. However, as I will explore in the next and final section, it is only with the failure of Yehya's quest that Tarek fully emerges from his complicity and becomes an active participant in altering the official record.

## **2.5 The failure of Yehya's quest**

This final section shall explore how Abdel Aziz characterises resistance to totalitarianism in her novel, first arguing that Yehya's failure acts as a call for action to Tarek, whose resistance takes the form of writing in order to alter the bureaucratic record. It will subsequently explore the implications of the unanswered questions that the end of the narrative opens up, namely the failure to conclude Yehya's quest and the lack of knowledge of what exactly Tarek writes in his medical files. It ultimately argues

that as Yehya functions as a call to action for Tarek, the inconclusiveness of the narrative assumes the same function for the reader. Yehya begins the novel waiting for the surgery that would remove the bullet from his pelvis and ends it in exactly the same circumstance. With his attempts to retrieve the X-ray and permit failed, his physical and mental health deteriorated, and with an intense feeling of hopelessness Yehya is still in the queue and still waiting. What is also significant, however, is the effect that Yehya's failure has on others, functioning as a call to action both for Tarek and for the novel's readers. While formerly passive and attempting to assuage his guilt over neglecting his patient, Yehya's sustained failure to save himself inspires a change within Tarek. Indeed, the final chapter 'Tarek's Proposal' features an active Tarek proposing to do the surgery at Nagy's to Yehya – who agrees to the plan but wants 'to wait a few days in case Alfat returned, to see if she would agree to assist' (212) – this perpetuating Yehya's fate as one who is constantly in wait. With this plan set in motion Tarek looks over his patients file for a final time and notices something strange, that 'there was no record of his visit at all, not a single line or the slightest indication that he'd been there. It was strange. This was the first time nothing new had been recorded about Yehya' (215). Yehya's disappearance from the record reflects his literal disappearance, only leaving behind a brief epithet '[o]n the bottom of the page ... a line he'd [Tarek] somehow missed: *Yehya Gad el-Rab Saeed spent one hundred and forty nights of his life in the queue*' (215, emphasis in original). While this pronouncement signals finality for Yehya, for Tarek it is a call to action inspiring him to alter the record by adding another sentence. In 'Gloss on Resistance', Jean-François Lyotard draws upon George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, specifically Winston's decision to start keeping a diary, in order to examine how the act of writing can function as a form of resistance against Newspeak and thereby the totalitarian bureaucracy. 'Even when totalitarianism has won', he asserts, 'when it occupies the whole terrain, it is not fully realized unless it has eliminated the uncontrollable contingency of writing. So totalitarianism must renounce writing ... But if totalitarianism remains unwritten, it cannot be total'. (102). Should totalitarianism attempt to be written, he continues, it concedes that inherent in writing 'is at least one region where restlessness, lack and "idiocy" come out into the open. And by conceding this, it gives up any hope of incarnating the totality, or even of controlling it'

(102). Literary and artistic writing's demand of 'privation [dénouement], cannot cooperate with a project of domination or total transparency, even involuntarily' (101). Lyotard argues that 'this resistance is first inscribed, conspicuously, in the novelistic genre and narrative mode peculiar to *1984*' with Winston's 'initial act of resistance' being the decision to keep a diary, a decision that allows him to craft his own narrative (101). Writing thereby becomes an interrupting force within the totalitarian bureaucracy in its ability to introduce an alternative perspective, to say something new and resist surrendering and forgetting. While I do not entirely agree with Lyotard's position in this article – particularly his assertion that in not putting forward 'a theoretical critique of bureaucracy', Orwell's use of literary writing 'suggests that the genre of criticism is incapable of resisting the coercive sway of bureaucracy' – his identification of Winston's writing as the first act of resistance has particular resonance with the last action of Abdel Aziz's novel.<sup>78</sup> Tarek's first act of resistance also takes the form of writing, although the reader is left unaware of what he actually writes:

There was no need to read the pages of the file another time. He automatically reached in his pocket, but he'd left his favorite pencil in the pocket of his coat, which was at home. He took a blue pen from his desk drawer instead, and as he hesitated for a moment on the paper it left a small dot of ink on the page. Then quickly, he added a sentence by hand to the bottom of the fifth document. He closed the file, left it on his desk, and rose. (215)

Tarek's emergence out of complacency is also represented through documentation, as he gradually begins to question the information that inexplicably appears and disappears, and ultimately becomes an active participant by permanently altering the record. While previously subject to the words of others, to documents that would disappear and be inexplicably altered, occasionally pencilling in comments or drawings, this final paragraph represents his stand against erasure. Throughout the novel, Tarek exclusively used a pencil, as I noted earlier in this chapter in his drawing of Yehya with 'a small, solid circle, completely shaded in' to represent the bullet in his pelvis, which he then promptly erased (25). In this final paragraph, the representation of the bullet is no longer

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<sup>78</sup> Lyotard also negates the fact that artistic writing, as well as art in general, can support and promote totalitarianism as effectively as resisting it.

drawn in erasable pencil but ‘a small dot of ink on the page’, an indelible, unavoidable truth. Abdel Aziz ends her novel with Tarek closing the file and rising, rising against a system that he was previously complicit in. Yehya’s failure to achieve the permit for the surgery and resist his own erasure does not only illustrate the impossibility of navigating the space of failure, but also how failure can function as a call to resistance.

Abdel Aziz leaves what happens to Yehya and what Tarek chooses to write in his file up to interpretation, instead focusing on the latter’s political awakening. Thus the sentence regarding the duration of time that Yehya spends in the queue is the last mention of him. Jaquette speaks of her difficulty in translating this final sentence, specifically whether it should read “‘Yehya Gad el-Rab Saeed *spent* one hundred and forty nights of his life in the queue” or “*had spent*”’, questioning whether ‘the shift in verb tense would lead the reader closure to a certain interpretation of Yehya’s fate’ (“Let Loose”, emphasis in original). This conscious decision to render the conclusion of Yehya’s story ambiguous raises questions about the effect that the author intended with her lack of narrative closure to Yehya’s quest. The study of narrative closure and its effects on the reader’s interpretation has been analysed at great length, leaning towards a general acceptance that to end a story in a satisfactory way functions to fulfil the expectations of the reader, answers all pressing questions brought up by the narrative, and provides a feeling of wholeness and completeness. Kermode’s seminal *The Sense of an Ending* introduced the idea of the use of endings, building upon the Aristotelian narrative framework of beginning, middles, and ends.<sup>79</sup> He argues that ‘[m]en in the midst [sic] make considerable imaginative investments in coherent patterns which, by the provision of an end, make possible a satisfying consonance with the origins and with the middle’, that human beings order their lives within this pattern in order to make sense of existence (17). Peter Brooks follows in the same vein by proposing that the reader begins reading in anticipation of the end: ‘The sense of a beginning ... must in some important way be determined by the sense of an ending’ (94). ‘We might say that we are able to read present moments’, he continues, ‘– in literature and, by extension, in

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<sup>79</sup> Since Kermode’s study a number of analyses into the idea of narrative closure have been published. To name but a few in addition to Brooks, Barbara Herrnstein Smith’s *Poetic Closure: A Study of How Poems End* (1968) and Noel Carroll’s ‘Narrative Closure’ (2007).

life – as endowed with narrative meaning only because we read them in anticipation of the structuring power of those endings that will retrospectively give them the order and significance of the plot’ (94). In summation ‘[t]o say “I have begun ...” (whatever it may be) acquires meaning only through postulation of a narrative begun, and that beginning depends on its ending’ (94). This is particularly of concern with quest narratives, which tend to set out their resolution at the beginning of the narrative. In *The Political Unconscious*, Fredric Jameson posits that the text ‘constitutes a symbolic act, whereby real social contradictions, insurmountable in their own terms, find a purely formal resolution in the aesthetic realm’, thus ‘the individual narrative, or the individual formal structure, is to be grasped as the imaginary resolution of a real contradiction’ (64, 62). If denying an imaginary resolution within the aesthetic realm requires readers to establish their own sense of meaning in order to resolve a real contradiction, then Yehya’s inconclusive fate serves as a call for action not only for Tarek but also for the reader. This is most reminiscent of the alienation effect as theorised by Bertolt Brecht, who advocated for denying closure and therefore catharsis, thus provoking a greater political engagement in the audience. By denying Yehya closure, leaving him waiting in the queue perpetually, Abdel Aziz provides no catharsis for her reader’s anger at the pain and injustice her characters suffer under the regime of the Gate. In the beginning of this chapter, I argued that by making the dystopic setting a representation of contemporary Egypt rather than a futuristic one, the novel negates the complacency and lack of urgency that can be a by-product of dystopic settings. The failure she depicts is a present one and this very failure challenges both Tarek and the reader to resist. Thus, as Tarek closes his patient’s medical file, obscuring the last word on Yehya’s fate and rises up, Abdel Aziz challenges her readers to do the same.

In *The Queue*, Abdel Aziz depicts the landscape of post-revolutionary Egypt as a dystopia, utilising as her central conceit for totalitarian bureaucracy a perpetually shut Gate and its ever-growing queue. It is this space that the questing protagonist Yehya must navigate in pursuit of his goal to obtain a permit to undergo surgery to remove a bullet lodged in his pelvis. In my analysis of Yehya, I identified him as a more passive and stationary version of the quester, one who does not engage with the political system until forced to. Tarek also exhibits similar tendencies, yet while Yehya makes no

progress throughout the novel, the surgeon grows increasingly invested in his patient's wellbeing, spurring his eventual resistance. Abdel Aziz, however, displays no condemnation or judgement for those who, exhausted and frightened after repeated violent clashes, simply wish to get on with their lives. Yet the state, represented by the Gate and its massive queue, render this impossible by becoming inescapable primarily through an overwhelming fear of erasure. By the end of the novel, Yehya becomes the latest victim of this erasure, having failed to obtain his permit and undergo the much-needed surgery. With Tarek's response to Yehya's fate, however, Abdel Aziz posits that even a failed attempt at survival, or indeed a failed revolution, can function as a call to resist.



## Conclusion

In analysing how the quest narrative has been recontextualised by contemporary authors to respond to global and local failures, I identified five aspects essential to the contemporary failed quest in each of the novels: the quester, their motivation to quest, their encounters with other characters, the space of failure, and the failure of the quest and its implications. I firstly sought to redefine the protagonist of the quest from the hero of the narrative to the quester by characterising the characters not by their heroic deeds, or lack thereof, but by their act of embarking on their quest. These quests challenge the perception of the genre as a tradition solely accessible to male heroes. The quests depicted by Ondaatje and Kristeva both portray women as their quester. Kristeva's particularly challenges the notion of the quest as a male-oriented narrative by having the text centre around the problematics inherent in the creation of female narratives, especially those truthful to their subjects. McCarthy depicts a male-centred quest and a sole female character, yet by presenting a viable alternative to the quest the wife manages to transcend her limited role and reclaim a sense of agency. Abdel Aziz features a male quest yet is highly concerned with the experience of women in her text, exploring how Ines and Amani cope with the psychical and psychological threat of erasure. Furthermore, these quests also trouble the notion of the quest as strictly the purview of Western literature. Ondaatje does this most predominately, critiquing Western heroes whose brief sojourns in foreign countries make for exciting and exotic stories that are easily packaged and sold. While Kristeva's text follows the exploits of a French woman in a fictional Eastern European city, it is highly concerned with how hostility towards foreigners influences the narratives created about the women in the novel. Abdel Aziz presents an allegorical dystopia that, despite its multitude of comparisons to Kafka and Orwell, is fundamentally informed by post-revolutionary Egypt and its people. The contemporary variants of the quest protagonist thereby expand the opportunities for a variety of ways the individual negotiates their way through the questing landscape.

In analysing the motivation, I sought to remove the quest from the sole purview of risk and adventure. The quests I discuss in this thesis are either ones for survival, as

in McCarthy's and Abdel Aziz's, or ones in which the protagonist is intensely invested in its successful outcome, as with Ondaatje and Kristeva. In selecting and defining these quests, I wished to avoid the kind of failure that strives for an impossible perfection or utopia. In the minds of the questers, their goals are realistic and achievable through hard work and determination. While the man in *The Road* and Yehya in *The Queue* are plagued by doubts and hopelessness regarding the possibility of their survival, giving up is not an option they have the luxury of considering. Ondaatje's Anil and Kristeva's Stephanie are extremely emotionally invested in the cases they investigate, identifying with the victims whose murders they are trying to solve and wishing to reveal the truth about their lives and deaths. These novels show that failed quests in which the protagonist believes that their goals are realistically achievable and are significantly invested in their successful outcome, present a more interesting view of failure than one in which success was always assumed to be impossible.

As I argued in the first chapter, the quest narrative is an extremely individualistic genre, generally centring around the exploits and adventures of a single hero. Yet in the texts I examine, other characters generally function as more than mere aids or obstacles but have their own lives and journeys to consider. In *The Road*, the man's wife manages to take control of her own life through suicide, reclaiming a form of agency that is untenable for the remaining survivors. Furthermore, their encounters with other people and the cannibals cause them to question the Manichean morality they adhere to that informs their perception of themselves as the good guys in a story. The Sri Lankans Anil encounters repeatedly emphasise how after long decades of civil war everyone has blood on their hands, complicating her simplistic ideas of innocence and guilt. Kristeva defines the relationships in her novel through the act of speaking, thereby informing Gloria's narrative which Stephanie decides to remain silent about. Abdel Aziz depicts a diverse cast of characters all of whom are connected by their waiting in the queue, unable to access basic services from the faceless government, thus taking care not to demonise or valorise any of the citizens in her novel. The presence of other characters for the quester to encounter often functions as a challenge to the protagonist, not of their dedication to or worthiness of the quest. Rather, by living their own lives they can indirectly present alternatives to the quester's single-minded focus.

Each of the novels, I argue, has presented a space informed by localised ideas of failure specific to its socio-political context. The protagonist must negotiate with this space on both the material and immaterial level in order to pursue their goal. McCarthy's is the most devastated of these spaces, depicting a post-apocalyptic world that I argue is fundamentally informed by twenty-first century American anxieties, specifically ecological, economic, and ideological. Ondaatje explores how Western representations of Sri Lanka often create a distorted and dangerous narrative of the country by having his characters engage in a long discussion of the nature and consequences of truth. Kristeva creates a fictionalised city, Santa Varvara which, in addition to being mired in corruption, also displays an intense hatred and suspicion of foreigners, particularly foreign successful women. Abdel Aziz creates a dystopic vision of post-revolutionary Egypt as a totalitarian bureaucracy which is primarily defined by an overwhelming fear of erasure that exists as a physically and psychological threat. The questing landscape is one I therefore identify as a space of failure, that is, a space which is fundamentally informed by this localised failure than renders the successful completion of the quest impossible.

The last aspect of the failed quest I focus on is the failure itself. In the case of *The Road*, I argue that McCarthy's dystopic vision presents no possibility of a successful future – for the boy or humanity as a whole – and thus expresses anger at the conditions that rendered the failure inevitable. Ondaatje depicts Anil leaving Sri Lanka without achieving justice for the victims of its civil war through her utilisation of a Western forensic approach that he identifies as inadequately applied in the country. Stephanie keeps her silence on the truth of Pauline's role in the murder thus proliferating a false and distorted image of Gloria. And Yehya ends the narrative as he started it, waiting in the queue in hope that he will still receive the permit, with the novel implying that time eventually ran out for him. As I have explored in my analysis of each novel, it is the various spaces of failure that render the protagonist's ultimate failure in this section inevitable.

That the quest narrative could be used by such a diverse range of writers to conceptualise such different failures is, I argue, a testament to the genre's longevity and flexibility. In this thesis, I sought to set my approach apart from modernist and

postmodernist articulations of the genre. The former, I argued, saw the quest as a method of achieving universal truths, an approach directly in contrast to mine which stresses the importance of local socio-political contexts in informing the genre. To adopt a postmodern approach, on the other hand, would assume a stable foundation of the quest genre upon which subversion or deconstruction would be performed, a notion against which I argued in the first chapter. Approaches to the quest narrative have often focused on its formulaic aspects, discussing how an author might adapt and update the genre but not why they would use this particular genre. As I noted, the quest's preoccupation with success, particularly individual success, render it an ideal vehicle to represent discourses of failure, specifically, how to understand how failure has changed in the last two decades. This can create the opportunity for an approach to genre which is underdeveloped, one that is less formula-oriented and more socio-political, particularly with genres that have a such long tradition that they can easily descend into the formulaic. This thesis has focused on the quest narrative due to its concern with failure but has also engaged with other narratives that have long enough traditions so as to develop a formula, including the apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic and dystopic genres, as well as the more recently psychoanalytic and forensic detective story. Memory scholar Ann Rigney notes the 'interest in cultural memory studies among literary scholars', in how 'the textual medium is used to shape remembrance by paying attention to certain things rather than others, to structure information in certain ways, and to encourage readers to reflect on their own position in relation to the events presented' (347). Yet this interest has mainly focused on individual texts. 'More research', Rigney states, 'needs to be done on the relation between the memorability, aesthetic power, and cultural longevity' (348). In addition, I propose also the relation between genre relevance and socio-political context requires more examination, particularly in terms of what narratives resonate when and where, and with whom.

In defining the idea of failure, my first chapter gave an overview of previous scholarship on failure. The primary focus, I discerned, was on individual failure and how the individual negotiates their role as a failure, and I identified three main strains of this scholarship, which I termed personal failure, temporary failure, and alternative failure. These approaches, I argued, were generally sympathetic to the failed individual

and attempted to soften or rehabilitate the idea of failure. However, given that the last two decades have borne witness to a series of failures with widespread global consequences – from a sharp increase in global inequality to the global financial crisis to the looming threat of ecological disaster – I proposed that failure could also be understood as a method of characterising a socio-political critique of contemporary global and local systems and institutions. Although in theorising failure I broached the concept of economic crisis as a key aspect of failure, I discussed its implications in terms of the social and the political, that is, how the financial crash in particular led to a loss of faith in banking institutions and the capability of achieving justice for financial wrong-doing. The treatment of economic failure in literature of the past decade, however, is a subject that requires more examination. Piketty introduces his *Capital in the Twenty-First Century* by emphasising the importance of literature in tracing changing shifts in perceptions of wealth and income. ‘Film and literature’, he argues, ‘nineteenth-century novels especially, are full of detailed information about the relative wealth and standards of different social groups, and especially about the deep structure of inequality, the way it is justified and its impact on individual lives’ (2). Taking the works of Jane Austen and Honoré de Balzac as prime examples, a trend he continues throughout the text, he describes both novelists as ‘intimately acquainted with the hierarchy of wealth in their respective societies’ (2). ‘In most of these novels’, he notes, ‘the financial, social, and psychological setting is established in the first few pages, and occasionally alluded to thereafter, so that the reader will not forget everything that sets the characters of the novel apart from the rest of society’, in particular, ‘the monetary markers that shape their lives, their rivalries, their strategies, and their hopes’ (520). In depicting ‘the hidden contours of wealth and its inevitable implications for the lives of men and women, including their marital strategies and personal hopes and disappointments’, literature provides the opportunity to represent ‘the effects of inequality with a verisimilitude and evocative power that no statistical or theoretical analysis can match’ (2). While it is arguable how reliably literary representations of

wealth can be used as empirical data, there is certainly room to further explore the financial and social implications of the economy in literature.<sup>80</sup>

Piketty's prioritisation of nineteenth century novels in relation to economics reflects the substantial analysis that has been done in the field including Francis O'Gorman's *Victorian Literature and Finance* (2007), Henry and Schmitt's *Victorian Investments* (2009), and Nancy Henry's *Women, Literature and Finance in Victorian Britain* (2018).<sup>81</sup> The relation between economics and literature, however, remains under analysed. I argue that this is a subject that warrants further discussion, particularly following the global financial crisis. In *Show me the Money: The Image of Finance, 1700 to the Present*, Paul Crosthwaite, Peter Knight, and Nicky Marsh introduce their text by contextualising the crash in terms of crisis. 'The failures in the global financial system that occurred in 2008', they argue, 'were experienced as a crisis because they were confusing and chaotic. The causes and implications of the event appeared to be too complex, too impenetrable and too surprising to be understood' (1). If, however, crisis can be used to characterise the crash and its aftermath, the same cannot be said for the entire subsequent decade. I propose that failure offers an opportunity to examine what follows after the immediacy and chaos of crisis. Miriam Meissner's 2017 *Narrating the Global Financial Crisis: Urban Imaginaries and the Politics of Myth* is so far the only analysis of how the global financial crisis has been represented in literature, as well examining film and photography. This text takes as its focus 'English-speaking popular culture of crisis depiction' noting that in such 'narratives, two cities – London and, even more so, New York – tend to be overrepresented' due to their being 'where global financial institutions and infrastructures tend to conglomerate' (13). She acknowledges that 'due to the fact that both cities already have a particular prominence in the global imaginary of literature and film, photography, tourism and urban theory', this focus can obscure 'the preconditions and effects that the [global financial crisis] has in urban and rural places beyond London and New York' (13). In examining literary representations

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<sup>80</sup> For a critique of Piketty's use of literature as data see James Mulholland's 'Measuring Literature: Digital Humanities, Behavioral Economics, and the Problem of Data in Thomas Piketty's *Capital in the Twenty-first Century*' (2016).

<sup>81</sup> Anthony George Purdy's edited collection *Literature and Money* and John Louis DiGaetani's *Money: Lure, Lore, and Literature* both lean heavily towards the nineteenth century.

of economic failure, I propose that the view of global failure articulated in this thesis, as being informed by and informing localised failure, could offer a potential method of addressing this focus.

At the beginning of this thesis I noted how even the most sympathetic analyses of failure bear the risk of attempting to soften its blow by valorising, celebrating or dismissing it. On the other hand, a sole focus on the devastation of failure can also descend into nihilism and apathy with overwhelming bleakness engendering a loss of faith in political action, or indeed, human endeavour in general. I therefore outlined a recontextualization of failure that negotiated between these two positions. The four novels that constitute my corpus fully represent and acknowledge the consequences of failure without attempting to render it less distressing or more palatable. Yet, they also show that there remains hope even in such spaces of failure. This is a hope that is not predicated on the potential for future success but rather in the expression of values beyond the binaries of success and failure; one that can be found in the love between a father and son, in the touch of human connection, in the willingness to empathetically listen and speak, and the incentive to rise up and resist.

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